LONGNOR HERITAGE

Conserve, Comply, Construct

GUIDE TWO

Looking After The Historic Church

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Contents

Why we wrote this

A parish church is the hardest building type in the country to look after. It has the roof area of a small factory, the heating problem of a cathedral, the legal status of a scheduled monument in all but name, and an income from about forty people.

Almost nobody who takes on that job was trained for it. Churchwardens and fabric officers inherit a building several centuries old, a quinquennial report full of unfamiliar words, and a list of things that were already overdue when they arrived.

We are a contractor. We spend our working weeks on scaffolds and in roof spaces on buildings like yours, and most of what has gone badly wrong was avoidable and cheap to avoid. This guide sets out what actually damages churches, in the order it matters, along with the permission you need and the money you can get.

It is a companion to our first guide, Working With Old Buildings, which covers traditional construction, lime and repair philosophy in more depth. This one is about churches specifically, and it assumes no technical background at all.

One thing has changed that affects every reader. The Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme, which refunded VAT on repairs for more than twenty years, closed on 31 March 2026. Repairs now carry VAT in full. Chapter Eight explains what replaced it and what to do about your budget.

Cover photograph: historic parish church, used illustratively

1. Why Churches Fail Differently

The problem is not age. It is the ratio of roof to congregation, and the fact that nobody goes up there.

Domestic buildings and churches decay from the same cause — water in the wrong place — but churches do it faster and more expensively, for three structural reasons that have nothing to do with how well the building was made.

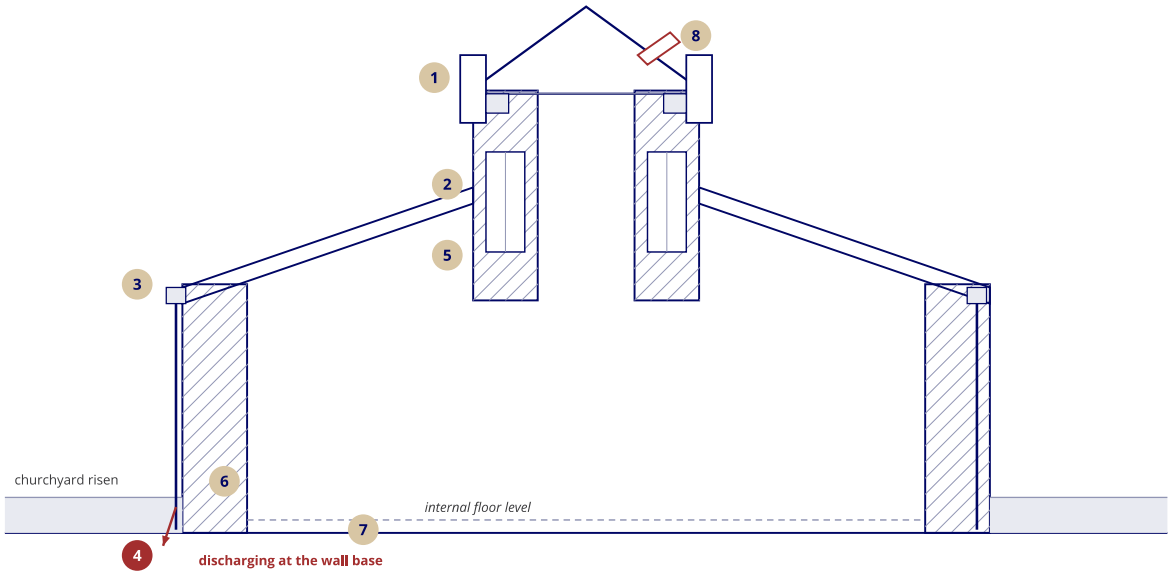
The first is scale. A parish church commonly has ten to twenty times the roof area per user of a house, and a corresponding length of gutter. That gutter has to be cleared by people who are not paid to do it, using access equipment nobody owns.

The second is height and complexity. Churches accumulate roofs: a nave, aisles either side, a chancel at a different pitch, a vestry lean-to, a porch, and a tower with a parapet. Every junction between two of those is a gutter or a flashing, and most of them are invisible from the ground.

The third is occupancy. A house is lived in daily and its owner notices a stain on the ceiling within a week. A church is used for a few hours a week, often in poor light, by people looking at the front. Water can run down inside a wall for two years before anyone remarks on it.

Where the water gets in

Transverse section through nave and aisles. Numbered roughly in the order we find them failing.



1. Parapet gutter. No overflow: it goes inside.
2. Valley where the aisle meets the nave wall.
3. Hopper and outlet, blocked by leaf litter.
4. Downpipe discharging at the wall base.
5. Clerestory cill and failed glazing bar.
6. Plinth buried by the rising churchyard.
7. Floor now below outside ground level.
8. Slipped covering, seen only from above.

KEY POINT
Seven of the eight are rainwater. None of them needs scaffolding to find — a dry day and a pair of binoculars will do it.

Figure 1. The numbered points are where we find failures, roughly in order of frequency. None of them is exotic. All of them are visible to someone who goes and looks.

The pattern behind almost every serious defect

Water enters at high level, usually because something is blocked rather than because something is broken. It runs inside the wall or roof structure, where it is invisible. It reaches timber — a wall plate, a truss end, a joist bearing — and stays damp long enough for rot or beetle to establish. By the time it shows internally, the structural repair is already necessary.

The interval between the blockage and the visible symptom is commonly two to five years. That interval is the whole problem: the cheap fix and the expensive consequence are separated by long enough that nobody connects them.

Nothing in this guide is more useful than getting somebody up to roof level once a year and looking.

Photograph 1. Tens of metres of gutter, three storeys up, behind a parapet. This is the part of the building that decides whether the rest of it stays dry.

What a church has that a house does not

Parapet gutters A gutter running behind a wall, above head height, with no overflow. When it blocks, water goes into the wall head rather than over the edge where you would see it.

Valley gutters Between nave and aisle roofs. Long, shallow, catches every leaf, and often only reachable from a tower or a long ladder.

Very high walls Rain runs down a large area of masonry and concentrates at the base, where the ground is usually too high already.

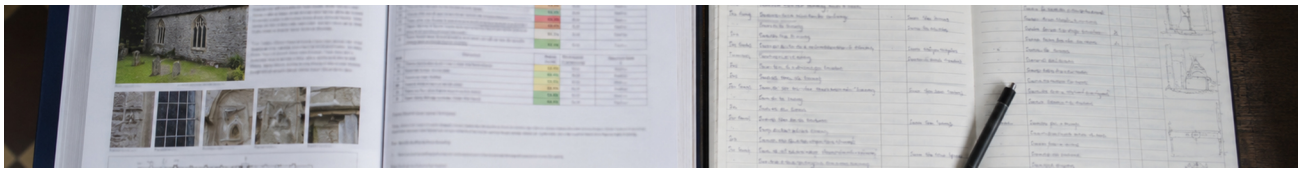
A raised churchyard Centuries of burial lift the ground, often above the internal floor level. Chapter Three deals with this.

Large unheated volume Cold surfaces, condensation, and big swings in humidity whenever the heating is used.

Lead and other metals Valuable, accessible and regularly stolen. Chapter Six.

A bell tower Puts dynamic load into masonry that was never calculated. Chapter Five.

Protected wildlife Bats are legally protected and their presence changes what you may do. Chapter Seven.



Photograph 2. The most valuable document the parish owns, and the one that records what was done about it. Neither is any use on its own.

The quinquennial report is your most valuable document

Every Church of England parish must have its church inspected every five years by an architect or surveyor appointed for the purpose. The resulting report is the single most useful thing you own, and it is routinely filed and forgotten.

Read it as a work programme rather than a document. Take the recommendations and sort them into four groups: things that will get worse this winter, things to do within the quinquennium, things to do when money allows, and things that are noted but not urgent. If the report does not make that distinction clearly, ask your inspecting architect to help you make it — they would generally much rather do that than write another report about the same defect in five years.

WHAT TO DO IN YOUR FIRST MONTH AS FABRIC OFFICER

Find the last two quinquennial reports. Compare them. Anything that appears in both, unresolved, is your priority list — it is getting worse and nobody has acted.

Get up to roof level, or pay someone to. A tower hire or a drone survey costs a fraction of what you will spend on the consequences of not knowing.

Photograph everything, dated. Every elevation, every gutter, every crack. This becomes the baseline that makes the next inspection meaningful.

Find out who has the keys and who is insured. Including the tower, the boiler house and the ringing chamber. It matters more than it sounds.

Write down when the gutters were last cleared. If nobody knows, the answer is 'too long ago'.

2. Gutters, Valleys and the Six-Monthly Clear

The cheapest job on the building, and the one that prevents the most expensive one.

If a parish could only afford to do one thing to its church, it should clear the gutters twice a year. Nothing else comes close on return. We have never yet surveyed a church with a serious high-level damp problem where the rainwater goods were being properly maintained.

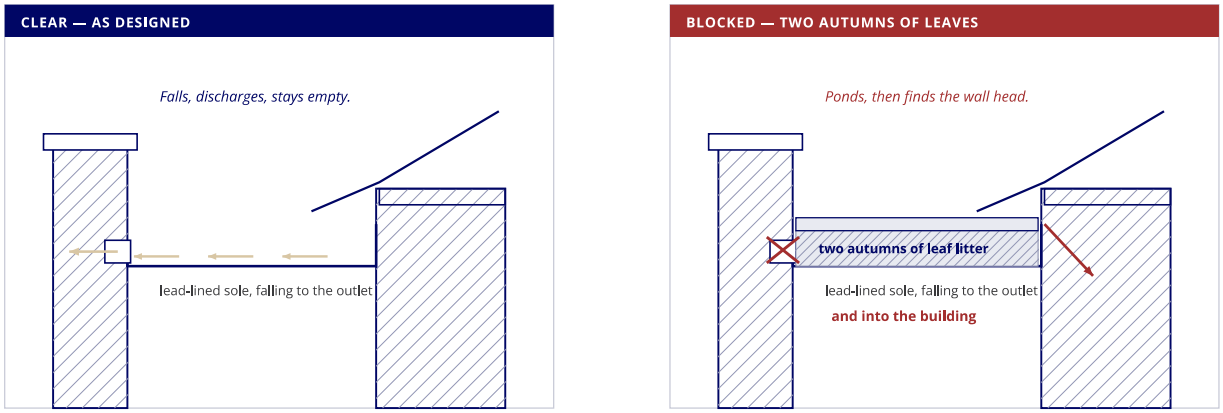
The difficulty is not the work. Clearing a parapet gutter is unskilled and takes a morning. The difficulty is getting to it, and that is a cost the parish has to accept as an annual line in the budget rather than an occasional emergency.

Water arrives from the roof slope, runs along the sole of the gutter and leaves through the outlet into a hopper and downpipe.

There is usually no overflow. That is the critical point. When the outlet blocks, the gutter fills, and the water has nowhere to go except over the upstand at the back and into the top of the wall — exactly where the roof timbers are bearing.

A parapet gutter, working and blocked

Section through the wall head. There is no overflow, and that is the whole of the problem.



The two clearances that matter

After leaf fall	October to December	ESSENTIAL
Late spring	blossom, nests, moss	USEFUL

KEY POINT
Batch it. The access equipment is the expensive part, not the labour — so clear, inspect and photograph on one visit.

Figure 2. A blocked parapet gutter does not drip visibly onto the floor. It puts water into the wall head and the truss ends, where it will not be seen until the damage is structural.

What goes wrong, and what it looks like

Staining on the internal wall high up, near the roof

Likely cause Parapet or valley gutter overflowing

Urgency Act this season

A tide mark or salting on masonry below a hopper

Likely cause Cracked hopper or blocked downpipe

Urgency Act this season

Plant growth in a gutter or on a wall head

Likely cause Long-standing blockage and silt build-up

Urgency Act this season

Green staining or moss down an external wall

Likely cause Overflowing or leaking rainwater goods above

Urgency Within the year

Water standing in a gutter days after rain

Likely cause Loss of fall, distorted lead, or a blocked outlet

Urgency Within the year

Splits or fatigue cracks in gutter lead

Likely cause Bays too long, or fixed so it cannot move

Urgency Get it looked at

Lead is not simply a material you replace like for like

Lead sheet fails predominantly through thermal fatigue, not corrosion. It expands and contracts every day, and if a bay is too long, or the sheet is fixed at both ends, or a repair has soldered two bays into one, the metal work-hardens and splits along a predictable line. A gutter that has been patched repeatedly in the same place does not have a patching problem. It has a bay-size problem.

This matters when you commission a repair. A contractor who relays the lead in properly sized bays with correct drips and clips will cost more than one who patches, and the difference will be recovered several times over. Ask specifically how long the bays will be and how the sheet is fixed.

A MAINTENANCE REGIME THAT WORKS

Two clearances a year, and diarise them. Late autumn after the leaves are down is the essential one. Late spring catches blossom, nesting material and winter debris.

Batch everything into one access visit. While the tower or platform is there: clear gutters and hoppers, check flashings, look at the parapet copings, photograph the lot. The access is the expensive part, not the labour.

Walk round in heavy rain. Ten minutes with an umbrella during a downpour tells you more about your rainwater goods than any inspection in dry weather. Look for overflowing hoppers and water sheeting down walls.

Clear the gullies at the bottom too. A downpipe discharging into a blocked gully simply soaks the base of the wall. This is a job anyone can do from the ground.

Use a booking service if volunteers are thin. The National Churches Trust runs MaintenanceBooker, which connects churches with vetted contractors for gutter clearance and similar routine work.

Getting permission for this

Routine clearance and minor like-for-like repair to rainwater goods sits comfortably within the works a Church of England parish may carry out without a faculty, under List A, subject to the conditions there. Anything approaching renewal, or a change of material, moves you into List B or a full faculty. Chapter Eight sets out how that works. Do not let uncertainty about permission become the reason the gutters stay blocked — clearing them needs nobody's consent.

3. Ground Level, Damp and the Churchyard

Your churchyard has been rising for eight hundred years, and your floor has not.

Walk into most medieval churches and you step down. That is not a design feature. It is the result of centuries of burial slowly raising the ground outside while the floor stayed where it was.

In a great many parishes the external ground is now 300 to 600 millimetres above the internal floor, and in some it is higher than that. The base of the wall is effectively buried, sitting in wet soil, with no way of drying outwards on that face.

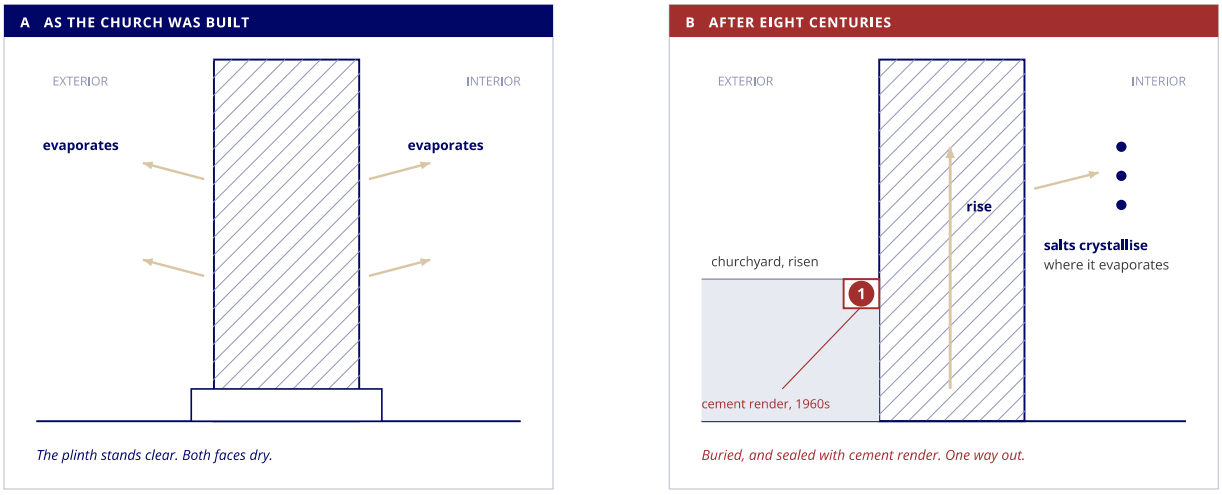
What that does to the wall

A rubble or ashlar wall built with lime mortar handles ground moisture the way it handles rain: it absorbs and evaporates. Bury the bottom of it and you remove the evaporation. Moisture then rises further up the wall than it otherwise would, carrying dissolved salts with it.

Churchyard soil is unusually rich in nitrates, for reasons that do not need spelling out. Those salts crystallise as the moisture evaporates at the internal face, and salt crystallisation is mechanically destructive — it is what turns a damp patch into powdering plaster and eroded stone. It is also hygroscopic, so the affected area draws moisture from the air and stays damp even in dry weather. A wall that reads as wet on a meter may be salt-contaminated rather than actively wet.

Why the bottom of the wall is wet

Section through the wall base, inside to the right. Eight hundred years of burial, in two drawings.



Churchyard soil is high in nitrates, and nitrates are hygroscopic.

A salt-contaminated wall reads wet on a meter in dry weather. Fix the rainwater goods and lower the ground before you conclude anything about the wall.

KEY POINT
Lowering the ground is cheaper, and works, in a way that nothing applied to the face of the wall ever does.

Figure 3. The left-hand condition is what the building was designed for. The right-hand one is what most churches now have, usually made worse by a Victorian or twentieth-century cement plinth.

The repairs that made it worse

Almost every church has received at least one of the following, in good faith, and each of them concentrates the problem rather than solving it.

A cement render or plinth externally, intended to keep water out, which instead traps it and drives the evaporation further up the wall and inside. **A hard cement floor** poured over an earth or flagstone floor, which removes the last remaining evaporation route and pushes moisture into the walls. **Gypsum plaster internally**, which is destroyed by salts and holds moisture against the masonry. **An injected chemical damp-proof course**, which cannot form a continuous barrier through a thick rubble-cored wall and does nothing useful.

The instinct to seal a damp wall is almost always wrong. The wall needs to dry, and sealing it removes the only route it has.

What actually helps

In order of cost and disruption. Start at the top; most churches never need to reach the bottom.

Fix the rainwater goods first A remarkable proportion of what gets diagnosed as rising damp is a leaking downpipe or a blocked gully. Do Chapter Two before anything in this chapter.

Clear vegetation from the wall base Ivy, shrubs and long grass hold moisture against the masonry and keep it in shade. Free, and immediately helpful.

Clear and re-lay gullies and drains Make sure every downpipe discharges into something that works and takes water away from the building.

Remove cement render and plinths Replace with lime, or leave the masonry bare. Needs permission and a competent contractor, but transforms the drying capacity of the wall.

Improve internal ventilation Especially under suspended floors and in vestries. Air movement is what does the drying.

Lower the external ground Effective but archaeologically sensitive — you are excavating a burial ground. Requires a faculty, archaeological supervision and careful thought. Not a volunteer job.

A French drain Sometimes recommended, often disappointing, and archaeologically invasive. Take specific advice before committing to one; it is not the default answer it is often presented as.

Reading Damp Honestly

A moisture meter reading is not a moisture measurement. The common pin-type meter is calibrated for timber. On salty masonry it reads the salt, not the water, and gives dramatic numbers that mean very little.

Distinguish damp from salt damp. If the affected area gets worse in humid weather and better in dry weather without any rain involved, you are looking at hygroscopic salts.

Look at the height and shape of the staining. A tide mark at a consistent height suggests ground moisture. A patch below a window or a gutter outlet suggests something above.

Do not accept a damp-proofing quotation as a diagnosis. Ask what the water source is and how the proposed work stops it. If the answer does not identify a source, keep asking.

4. Heating Without Harming the Building

The way most churches are heated is worse for the fabric than not heating them at all.

A church is heated hard for three hours on a Sunday morning and left cold for the rest of the week. That pattern is comfortable for nobody and actively damaging to the building, the organ, the monuments and the woodwork.

The mechanism is humidity rather than temperature. Warm air holds much more moisture than cold air, so when you heat a cold church quickly the relative humidity crashes. Then the heating goes off, the building cools, and the humidity climbs back — often to the point of condensation on cold stone. Every service puts the contents through that cycle.

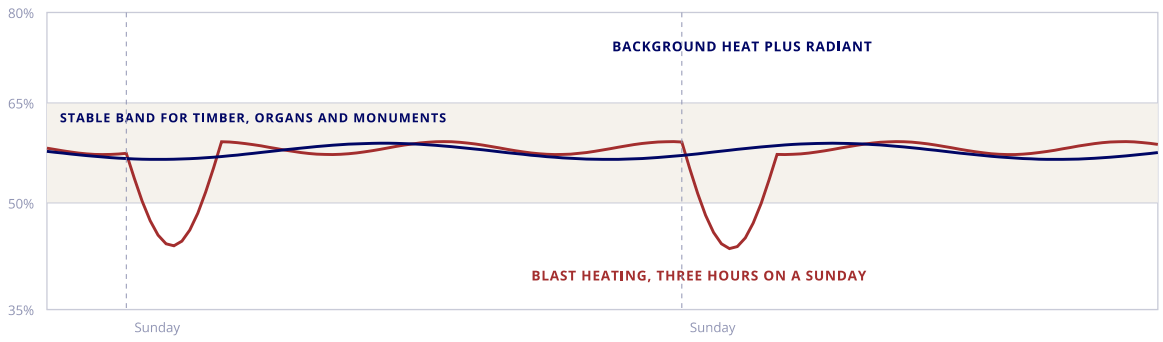
What the swing does

Timber, and anything made of it, responds to relative humidity by taking up and giving off moisture, which means swelling and shrinking. Repeated quickly and often, that opens joints, lifts veneers, cracks panel paintings and splits carvings. An organ is the most sensitive object in most churches: its soundboards, chests and pipework are all dimensionally sensitive, and organ builders will tell you that rapid humidity change causes more damage than anything else they see.

Condensation on cold masonry does the same work as a leak, and on monuments and wall paintings it does it in the worst possible place. Salts move, surfaces powder, iron cramps corrode.

What heating does to the humidity

Relative humidity in the nave across two weeks. The organ and the joinery respond to this, not to the temperature.



1 Heat the air, three hours a week

Slow, expensive, never quite warm, and the humidity swings forty points every service. The worst option for the organ and the woodwork.

2 Heat the people, hold the building

Radiant heat under the pews plus low background heat on a humidistat. Cheaper to run, easier to decarbonise, far kinder to the fabric.

KEY POINT
Leave humidity loggers in the nave, the chancel and the organ chamber for a full year before you specify anything.

Heat the people, not the volume

The single most useful idea in church heating is to stop trying to warm the air in a very large, leaky, cold-surfaced box and instead warm the people directly. Radiant heat — under-pew or under-chair heaters, and modern far-infrared panels — puts warmth where the congregation is, works within minutes rather than hours, and barely disturbs the humidity at all.

Alongside that, a low level of background heating held on a humidistat rather than a thermostat keeps the building a few degrees above outside and stops the humidity spikes. This is often called conservation heating, and it is what most historic building advisers now recommend for churches with significant contents.

The combination is usually cheaper to run than trying to reach a comfortable air temperature, and very much kinder to the building.

BEFORE YOU SPECIFY ANY HEATING SYSTEM

Monitor first, for a full year. A handful of inexpensive temperature and humidity loggers, left in the nave, the chancel, the organ chamber and the tower, will tell you more than any survey. Twelve months of data costs very little and completely changes the conversation with a designer.

Deal with draughts and the roof first. Heating a building that is losing warm air through an open tower arch and a gappy door is money into the sky. Draught lobbies and door seals are cheap and reversible.

Ask what happens to relative humidity, not just temperature. If the designer cannot answer that, they are designing for an office.

Involve the organ builder early. They have a legitimate and specific interest, and they will be blamed if it goes wrong.

Expect a faculty. A new heating system is a significant intervention. Involve the DAC at the idea stage, not when the design is fixed.

Net zero, honestly

The Church of England is committed to net zero carbon by 2030, and a revised route map was brought to General Synod in July 2026. Parishes are being encouraged to move away from gas and oil.

Two things are worth saying plainly. Decarbonised heat costs considerably more to install than a like-for-like boiler replacement — the Church's own analysis puts a heat pump at several times the cost of a gas replacement — and a heat pump delivers low-temperature heat, which suits a continuously-heated building and suits an intermittently-heated church very poorly indeed.

Which is an argument for the approach above rather than against the target. Radiant electric heating of people, combined with a small humidistat-controlled background system, is straightforward to decarbonise, cheap to install relative to wet systems, and better for the fabric. For many parishes the environmentally-sound answer and the conservation answer turn out to be the same one.

5. Towers, Bells and Movement

Most cracks in a church tower are old news. Some are not, and the difference is worth knowing.

Almost every church tower has cracks. Most of them have been there for a century or more and are doing no harm. A small number are live and matter a great deal. The purpose of this chapter is to help you tell the difference well enough to know when to call somebody.

Towers are unusual structures. They are tall, they are heavy, they often sit on shallow foundations laid directly on whatever was there, and — uniquely among building elements — a ring of bells applies a substantial swinging horizontal force to the top of them every week.

Where the loads come from

A ringing peal does not simply add weight. As each bell swings, it pushes the frame and therefore the tower walls from side to side, and a full peal applies that force rhythmically for a long period. If the bell frame is sound and properly braced to the masonry, the tower takes it. If the frame has loosened, or the bells have been rehung without attention to the frame, the movement transfers into the walls.

The classic result is vertical cracking at the corners of the tower at and just below the belfry stage, often running through the louvre openings, which are the weakest points in that ring of masonry.

Reading cracks in a tower

What to report, and how urgently. This is triage, not a substitute for an accredited structural engineer.

PATTERN	WHAT IT USUALLY MEANS	WHAT TO DO
1	**Fine, vertical, through the mortar only** Movement long since finished. Almost every tower has these.	**Record and photograph. No action.** Next quinquennial.
2 	**Stepped, diagonal, following the coursing** Differential settlement, usually old, sometimes seasonal with clay.	**Tell-tales, read monthly for a year.** Next quinquennial.
3 	**Vertical at a corner, opening at the top** The classic bell-frame signature: lateral force in the belfry stage.	**Stop ringing. Call an engineer.** **This week, and a bell-frame report.**
4	**Around a window head or a putlog hole** A local lintel or an old scaffold pocket, not the structure.	**Repair in the ordinary way.** Next quinquennial.

KEY POINT
Monitor before you act. A year of calibrated tell-tale readings costs almost nothing and is the first thing an engineer will ask for.

Figure 5. Crack patterns and what they usually mean. This is a guide to what to report, not a substitute for a structural engineer with conservation accreditation.

Telling a live crack from a historic one

Historic movement, long settled, tends to look established: the crack edges are weathered and rounded, there is old mortar or dirt in it, and any pointing across it is undisturbed. A live crack has clean, sharp arrises, fresh debris at the bottom, and cracked or displaced pointing where somebody has repaired it recently.

The way to be sure is monitoring, and it costs almost nothing. Simple calibrated tell-tales or studs measured with a gauge, read monthly for a full year and written down, will tell you whether a crack is moving and whether the movement is seasonal. A year of readings is worth far more than one engineer's opinion on one dry day in August, and it is exactly what the engineer will want to see.

TOWER HOUSEKEEPING THAT PREVENTS MOST PROBLEMS

Look at the tower roof and parapet gutter. Towers have flat roofs with parapet gutters and they block like any other. Water in the top of a tower runs down inside the walls the whole height of the building.

Check the louvres. Broken or missing louvre boards let rain drive straight into the belfry and onto the frame and bearings. They also let birds in, which brings guano, which brings its own problems.

Keep the belfry clean and dry. Ask the ringers — they are in there regularly and they notice things. They are the best-informed observers you have of a part of the building nobody else visits.

Watch for movement in the bell frame. Ringers report a change in the feel of a bell long before anything is visible. Take it seriously; it can indicate a loosening frame.

Have the lightning protection tested. Towers and spires are the most exposed structures in most parishes. Testing is inexpensive and insurers increasingly expect it.

When to stop and call someone

Ring your inspecting architect, and expect them to bring in a structural engineer, if you see any of the following: a crack that is visibly wider at one end than the other and passing through stones rather than just the mortar joints; any crack you can see daylight through; fresh debris or dust at the base of a crack; displacement, where one face of the masonry has moved out of plane with the other; or any movement that appears or worsens after a peal.

If in doubt, stop ringing until it has been looked at. Nobody has ever regretted a cautious month of silence, and the tower captain will understand the reasoning better than most.

6. Metal Theft, Fire and Lightning

Everything else in this guide is about slow decay you have time to address. This chapter is about the events that do not give you that time, and where preparation is the entire defence.

Metal theft

Lead is stolen from church roofs because it is valuable, unguarded and easy to sell. The theft itself is rarely the main cost. The damage comes afterwards: an uncovered roof over a plaster ceiling, in weather, for however long it takes to get a temporary covering on. A single wet week after a theft can destroy ceilings, wall paintings, an organ and the floor beneath.

Insurance will not make you whole. Church insurers have limited theft cover for metal for years, typically capping payouts substantially unless specified alarm systems are fitted and maintained. Check your policy wording now rather than after an incident — the sum you are actually covered for is usually far less than the replacement cost.

What to put back

After a theft the parish faces a genuine dilemma: replace in lead and risk a repeat, or use an alternative material. The heritage position is that lead is the historically correct covering and should normally be reinstated, but that where theft has recurred, an alternative may be permitted. In practice, the DAC and your inspecting architect will want to see evidence of repeated theft and of security measures before supporting a change of material.

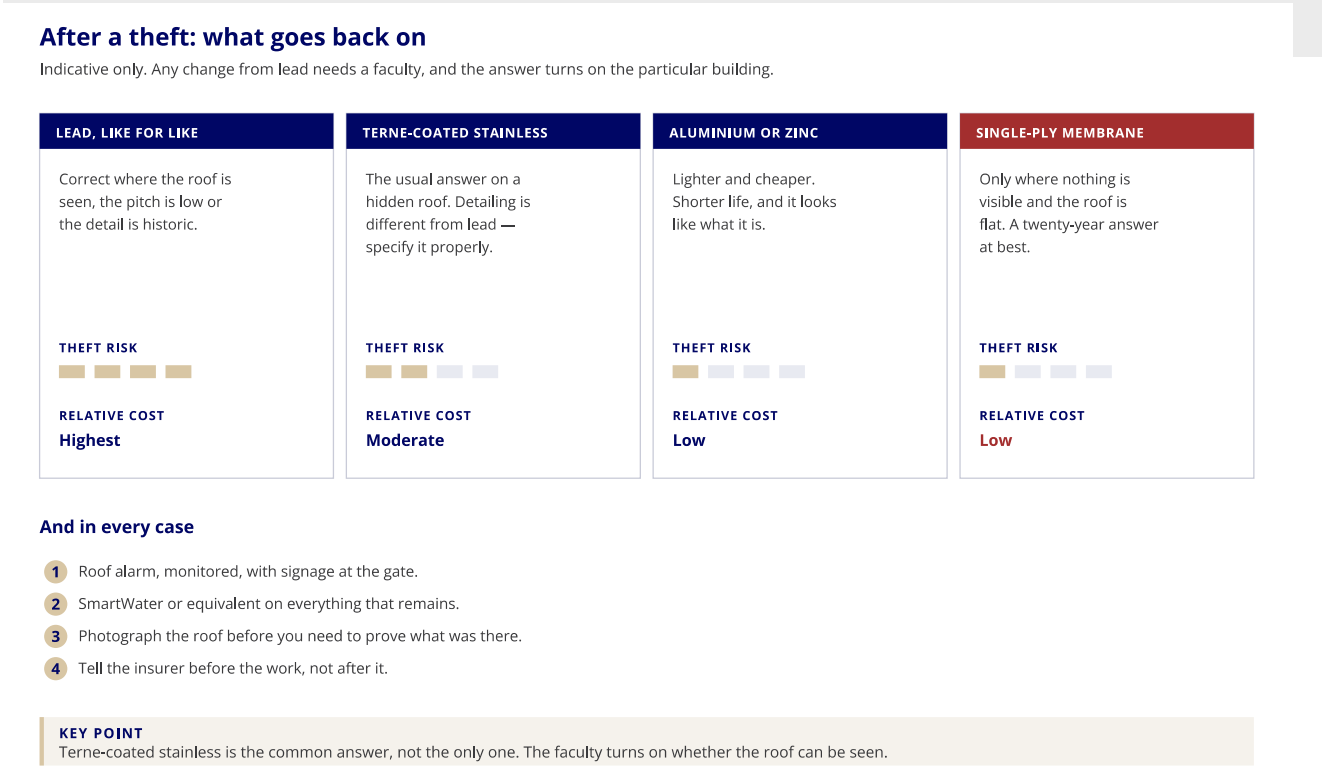


Figure 6. Indicative comparison for a nave or aisle roof after theft. Any change from lead needs a faculty and will be judged on the particular building, its significance and its history of theft.

SECURITY WORTH HAVING

A roof alarm. The measure your insurer most wants to see, and often the condition of meaningful cover. Modern systems detect movement on the roof and are monitored remotely.

Forensic marking. Marking the metal and displaying the signage is cheap and demonstrably deters. It also helps recovery and prosecution.

Remove the ladder. Ours and everybody else's. Also wheelie bins, scaffold left standing over a weekend, and anything else that gets someone onto a low roof. Most thefts start from an aisle or vestry roof.

Cut back the cover. Trees and dense shrubs beside a low roof give both access and concealment.

Have a wet-weather plan. Know now who you would call for an emergency temporary covering, and keep the number where you can find it at two in the morning.

Fire

Church fires are uncommon but almost always devastating, and a substantial proportion begin with contractors' hot works — soldering, torch-on felt, angle grinders — in roof spaces full of dry, dusty, centuries-old timber.

The defence is procedural and costs nothing. Insist on a written hot works permit for any work involving heat or flame; require work to stop at least an hour before the site is left; require a fire watch during that hour and an inspection of the space below and around the work; and check that the contractor has extinguishers to hand rather than in the van.

Beyond that: have the electrical installation inspected on the recommended cycle, keep the heating plant serviced, do not store anything combustible in the boiler house, and keep roof spaces clear of the accumulated jumble that most churches have put there over the years.

Lightning

A tower or spire is usually the tallest structure for some distance, and a strike can blow masonry apart, start a fire in the roof space, and destroy the electrical installation and the organ in one event.

Protection systems need periodic testing to remain effective — connections corrode and earth resistance changes. If nobody can tell you when yours was last tested, it is overdue. If there is no system at all, a risk assessment by a competent installer is the place to start; not every church needs one, but the decision should be a reasoned one rather than an omission.

THE FOLDER EVERY PARISH SHOULD HAVE

A current insurance schedule. With the metal theft conditions and sums insured highlighted, and read by more than one person.

An up-to-date plan of the building. Fire services find churches genuinely difficult. A plan showing access, water supply and the location of anything precious is invaluable.

A salvage priority list. Agreed in advance and photographed: what would be carried out first, and where it is. Nobody makes that decision well at three in the morning.

Contractor emergency numbers. Roofer, electrician, glazier, and someone who can make the building watertight at short notice.

Recent photographs of everything. For insurance, for the police, and for whoever has to reinstate it.

7. Bats, and the Law About Them

You cannot simply remove them, but you have more options than you probably think.

Bats in a church are a genuine burden — urine etches monuments and brass, droppings fall on the altar and the font, and the cleaning falls on the same few people every week. They are also strictly protected by law, and the protection applies to the roost whether or not the bats are in it at the time.

The combination causes real distress in parishes, partly because the legal position is widely misunderstood in both directions. Some parishes believe they can do nothing at all; others do something that turns out to be a criminal offence.

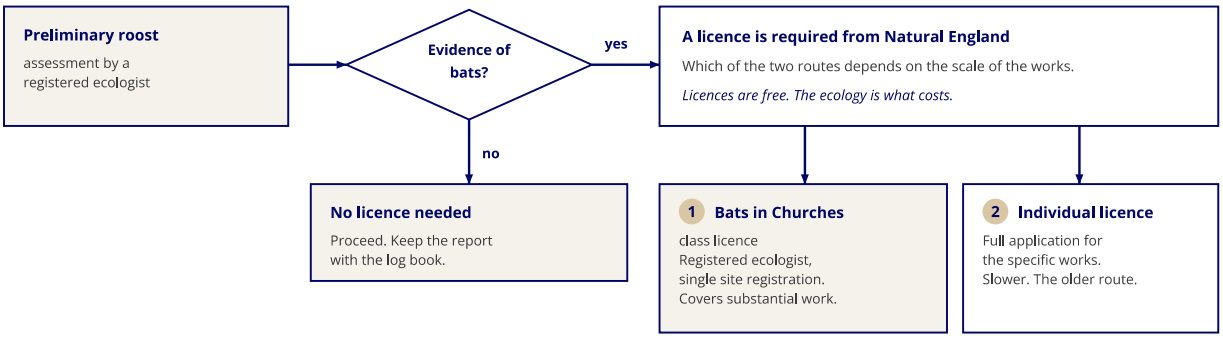
The legal position, briefly

All British bat species and their roosts are protected under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. It is an offence to deliberately capture, injure or kill a bat, to deliberately disturb them, or to damage, destroy or obstruct access to a roost. A roost is protected as a place, so blocking a gap that bats use is an offence even when they are elsewhere for the season.

What this does not mean is that you cannot repair your church. It means that works affecting a roost need to be planned, surveyed and — where they will disturb bats or affect the roost — licensed by Natural England. Licences are free; the ecological survey work behind them is not.

Bats: the route through

Start at the left, eighteen months before you need the scaffold. The survey seasons are short and they do not wait.



NEVER Block a roost, disturb one, or start work and deal with it later. It is a criminal offence and the penalty falls on the PCC as well as on the contractor.

Free advice, first

The National Bat Helpline advises churches on behalf of Natural England and can often arrange a roost visit. It costs nothing and it usually settles what you are actually dealing with. In the meantime, cover the altar, the font, the brasses and the ledger stones between services.

KEY POINT
Eighteen months. The survey window runs May to August, and a licence application behind it is another season gone.

Figure 7. The route through. The important thing is to start at the left-hand end early, because survey seasons are limited and this is the commonest cause of a church project missing a summer.

Covers between services are lawful, cheap and immediate. Blocking a roost is none of those things, and it is a criminal offence.

What has changed for churches

Churches used to be treated like any other building, which made major roof work slow and expensive. The Bats in Churches partnership — bringing together Natural England, the Church of England, Historic England, the Bat Conservation Trust and others — changed that in two useful ways.

First, there is now a class licence specifically for churches, which lets a registered and suitably experienced ecologist carry out significant mitigation work, including boxing in a roost or excluding bats from the body of the church, on a single site registration rather than a full individual licence application for each activity. Second, a substantial body of practical guidance now exists on what works in churches, which did not exist ten years ago.

The practical effect is that a church with a serious bat problem has real options — reordering the roost, providing alternative access, excluding bats from the areas that matter most — that were effectively unavailable a decade ago.

PRACTICAL STEPS IN ORDER

Get free advice first. The National Bat Helpline offers advice to churches on behalf of Natural England, and may be able to arrange a roost visit by a trained volunteer. This costs nothing and often resolves the question of what you are actually dealing with.

Commission a survey before you design the work. Not after. Bat surveys can only be done at certain times of year, and discovering a roost when the scaffold is up is the expensive way to find out.

Protect what you can in the meantime. Covers over the altar, font, brasses and monuments between services prevent most of the damage. Ledger stones and memorial brasses are particularly vulnerable to etching.

Clean correctly. Droppings are dry and brush up. Urine staining needs specific advice — the wrong cleaning agent on a monument does more harm than the bats.

Talk to your DAC. Most now have experience of bat cases and can point you to ecologists who have worked in churches before, which matters more than it sounds.

A word about tone

It is worth saying that the parishes that resolve this well are generally the ones that engage with the process early and pragmatically rather than fighting it. The law is not going to change, the ecologists are not the problem, and the licensing route genuinely does work now in a way it did not before. Starting eighteen months before you need the scaffold makes almost all of this manageable.

8. Permission and Money

Two things stop good repairs happening: not knowing whose permission is needed, and not having the money. The first is more tractable than parishes fear. The second changed materially on 1 April 2026.

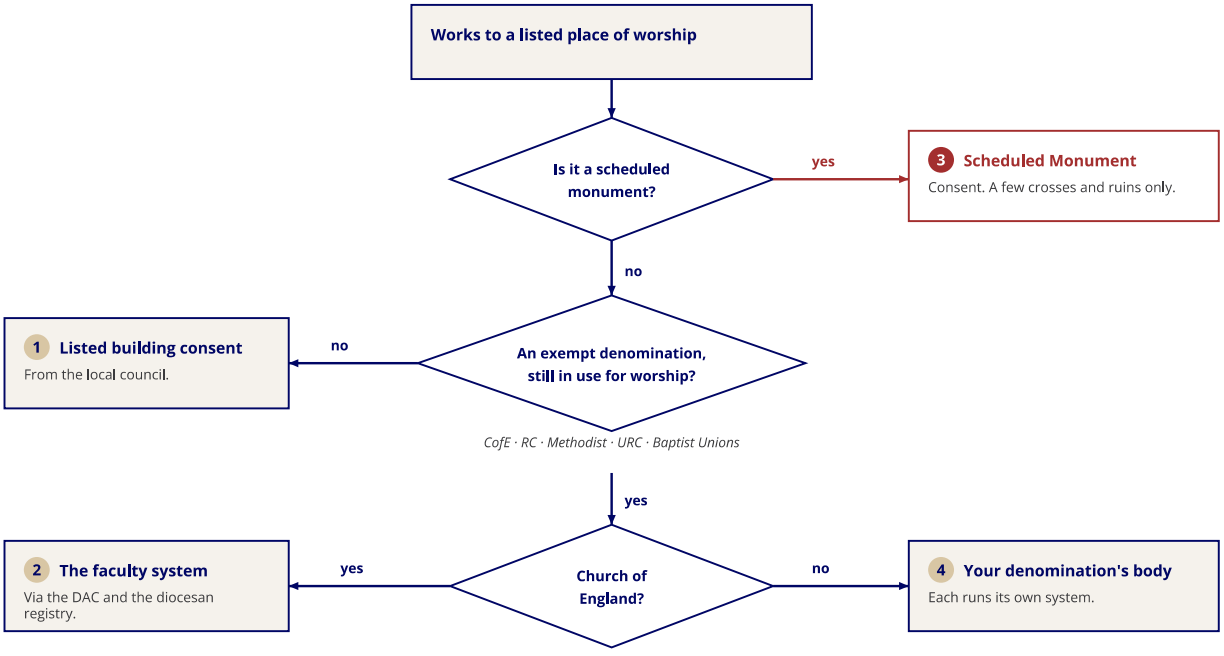
The ecclesiastical exemption, and who has it

Listed places of worship in certain denominations are exempt from the ordinary listed building consent system, on the basis that they operate their own equivalent internal controls. Under the Ecclesiastical Exemption (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) (England) Order 2010 that covers the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church, the Methodist Church, the United Reformed Church and the Baptist Unions of Great Britain and Wales.

Everybody else — independent chapels, other faiths, and any exempt building that has gone out of religious use — needs ordinary listed building consent from the local planning authority in the normal way. If you are a trustee of an independent chapel, the faculty system described below does not apply to you and your route is the council.

Whose permission do you need?

Simplified for England. Planning permission is a separate question and may still apply on top of everything below.



In every branch

The exemption covers listed building consent only. Planning permission is separate, and so is scheduled monument consent. Check the current rules on your diocesan website rather than an old printout — the procedure has been revised more than once in recent years.

KEY POINT
Ask the DAC secretary early and informally. It is free, and it is much cheaper than designing the wrong scheme.

Sources and further reading

The end of the VAT scheme

The Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme closed on 31 March 2026. DCMS, Evaluation of the Listed Places of Worship Scheme: Final Report, published January 2026.

Places of Worship Renewal Fund

Announced 22 January 2026 as part of a £1.5 billion cultural package including £230 million for heritage. £92 million over four years, delivered by Historic England. Expressions of interest opened 19 May 2026 (DCMS press release). Scheme details: Historic England.

Faculty jurisdiction

Faculty Jurisdiction Rules 2015, as amended, with Lists A and B at Schedule 1 and supplementary Additional Matters Orders. Current consolidated versions are published by the Church Buildings Council and by diocesan registries.

Ecclesiastical exemption

The Ecclesiastical Exemption (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) (England) Order 2010. Guidance on its operation is published by Historic England.

Bats

Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. The Bats in Churches class licence and supporting guidance are published by Natural England and the Bats in Churches partnership; free initial advice is available from the National Bat Helpline.

Heating and humidity

Historic England guidance on heating places of worship, and the Church of England's ChurchCare advice on heating and on the care of organs.

Net zero

General Synod resolved in February 2020 on net zero carbon by 2030; the Routemap was approved in July 2022 and a revised Routemap was presented to Synod in July 2026.

Maintenance

MaintenanceBooker, operated by the National Churches Trust, connects churches with vetted contractors for gutter clearance and routine maintenance.

Disclaimer

This is general guidance, not advice on your building, and nobody has inspected it. Some of the work described is hazardous — take advice from someone qualified before acting on any of it.

We accept no liability for reliance on this guide.

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What we do

Roofs, gutters and leadwork

Parapet and valley gutter relining in correctly sized bays, lead, slate and stone slate roofing, cast iron rainwater goods, tower roofs, flashings and parapet copings. Emergency temporary covering after theft or storm.

Masonry, lime and plaster

Repointing in matched lime mortars including hot-mixed work, stone and brick repair, removal of cement render and plinths, lime plastering and limewash, and the repair of monuments and ledger stones.

Towers and structural repair

Crack monitoring and recording, structural repair to belfry stages and louvres, spire and parapet work, and high-level access for inspection where nobody else can get to.

Maintenance for parishes

An annual access visit with everything done at once: gutters, valleys, hoppers and gullies cleared, high-level inspection, dated photographic record and a written defect list your PCC can budget against.

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