

ENGLISH HERITAGE AND ST MARY'S CHURCH

English Heritage, or, the name's the game

The responsibility for guarding the Nation's heritage in the King's name goes back to soon after the Norman Conquest. The organisation concerned was called the Office of Works, or similar such titles, and since there seemed little need for much name changing, thus it continued for centuries. However, in the 19th century new ideas about the structure of governance emerged. Further stimulated perhaps by Prince Albert, the name and detailed function of the system began to evolve. Word-turgid titles and offices proliferated until 1984 when Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, was invited to become chairman of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England. He gave it the operating name of English Heritage, by which it is still familiarly known. He recognised its importance in listing all the buildings and collections and linked it with his enthusiasm for making them more accessible to tourism. And now, since April 2015, this worthy organisation has been merged with others and has had its functions modified and its name changed yet again to the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England (for short, Historic England).

So what's different? Among its various remits a major function is still as it practically always has been, to preserve and protect, classify and list historic collections - buildings, shipwrecks, parks and gardens and other ancient monuments. There are 28 further unrelated organisations which are involved in various aspects of historic buildings. Phew!

What does listing mean?

It is estimated that there are around half a million listed buildings on the National Heritage List for England (NHLE), which actually comprises (in 2016) 376,470 entries. It may come as a surprise that the real number of listed buildings is not known. This is because whole rows of terraced houses for example and sometimes whole estates are listed as a single entry. Most are 18th and 19th century buildings (64%). Just under a fifth are 17th century, some 15% are listed as "before 1600" and a mere handful (<3.5%), have been listed since 1900. Buildings which are exceptionally important – sometimes even internationally so – are classified as Grade I, less important buildings, but of more than special interest, may be classified II* and the remaining listings are classified as Grade II.

In this world of ever-increasing complexity the preservation of such a simple system is itself worthy of comment. Just over 10,000 (2.5%) of them are grade I and some 20,000 (5.5%) grade II*. The remaining 340,000 or so are grade II. The list is compiled by the office of the Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport (!) Officially, listing is not a preservation order, preventing change. It does not freeze a building in time, it simply means that listed building consent must be obtained in order to make any changes which might affect its special interest. There is a stated intention to balance the site's historic significance against other issues, such as its function, condition or viability. So in theory (and indeed occasionally in practice) listed buildings may be demolished; but that is rare. Decisions regarding permission to alter listed buildings and their curtilages lies in the hands of individuals within local units of English Heritage, sorry, Historic England.

The Church of St Mary, Comberton

Comberton has 42 listed buildings, almost all 16th to 18th century jobs, but not entirely. Two of these stand out. One is Glebe Cottage, the only Grade II* building in the village, with its crown post structure and fabric datable to the 14th century. The other is the Church of St Mary. This article is mainly concerned with the Church, however, which unlike most of the parish churches in South Cambridgeshire is listed Grade I. The dry description of the church, identified in the list as 1310174, and mostly it would seem condensed from Pevsner, gives little idea of the attraction and excitement still to be felt when in the building. The Reverend Percival Gardner-Smith, vicar from 1916 to 1923, wrote a definitive history of the building which is readily accessed on the Internet. He writes of the splendour it must have displayed until that fateful March 9th in 1643 when William



Fig 1

Dowsing arrived to carry out the Parliamentary orders to remove idolatrous works. Among many acts of savage destruction he smashed sixty-nine superstitious pictures – the stained glass windows. It is just possible to imagine a little of the glory from the fragments of glass which are reassembled in the window containing the Dole casement.



Fig 2

The present structure has some quite early features. Gardner-Smith cites the single row of pointed arches in the nave as Early English, which together with the lancet windows in the chancel indicate the 13th century at the latest. The other side of the nave is carried by perpendicular style arches of the 15th century. The 15th century in fact saw the benefaction of probably the most important feature of the church and which was to contribute so much to the accolade of Grade I when the church was registered in 1962. The letters GB for Geoffrey de Burdeley, lord of the manor, are found carved in several places among the series of oak benches and their figured finials, all of which he commissioned.



Fig 3



Fig 4



Fig 5

Many suffered subsequently, particularly under Dowsing's ministrations but those that remain, and some later copies, show how fine the original display must have been. A beautifully carved Rood Screen still shows fragments of pigment suggesting that the whole church was decorated to a lively and colourful level. Further centuries saw much neglect as well as fitful restorations, the most complete of which in the 19th century seems to have painted out the graffiti thought to have been present throughout the church. All that remain are those in a room in the tower and some on the stonework of several windows. Some of these graffiti go back to the 17th century.

The church still has, or had, other remnants of its chequered past which are interesting. Clearly, from the arms of William of Orange mentioned by the reverend Percival, there was little sympathy for James II in the village. The font, too, which is very early – perhaps 12th century – has been moved about. Why would that be? I could go on but will leave something for another occasion.



Fig 6



Fig 7

But the church is in trouble. Not the disaster kind of trouble, but worrying. As you will know from previous editions of Contact, the lead has been stolen from the roof **twice** during 2016. A double act of vandalism not perhaps quite comparable with Dowsing's efforts, but nevertheless one which required tens of thousands of pounds to replace. In addition, St Mary's Parochial Church Council has listed a series of repair works, identified in categories relating to their urgency, that will require further tens of thousands of pounds to be spent over the next years. This is why the Friends of St Mary's Church Comberton was set up and this is really why we want to raise even more interest in preserving this fine building.

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www.friends-of-st-marys.org.uk

- Fig 1 Medieval glass in top of the "Dole" window
- Fig 2 Medieval fragments in the same window
(Note the wire grill protection on the outside of the window)
- Fig 3 15th Century Pew end
- Fig 4 15th A Lion: 15th Century Finial. Note "GB"
- Fig 5 An Angel: A later finial in the same style.
Note perhaps the incorrect copying of GB initials
- Fig 6 17th century: 1626 and 1634 graffiti
- Fig 7 Probably commemorating the Versailles Treaty after WWI (PAX)