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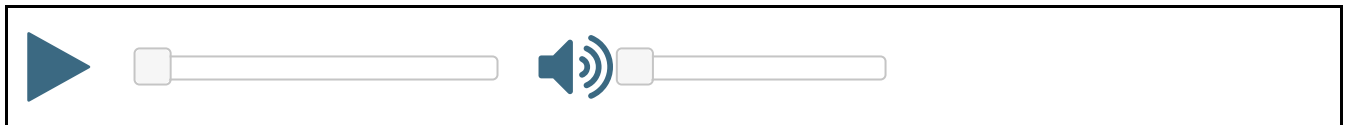
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Abandoned churches resurrected: solitaries made of stone

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‘Friendless’ churches that are abandoned or have fallen into disrepair find help against the odds, writes *Peter Ross*

FRIENDS OF FRIENDLESS CHURCHES



I **CROSSED** the border into Wales, and, moments later, pulled off the road at the side of fields. Three farm gates faced me. Those to the left and right bore hand-painted signs, warning: “Beware of the Bull.” The gate in the centre seemed more promising. I could see a little



church at the foot of a rutted grassy track: white bellcote rising above trees, cockerel on the weathervane black against the blue sky. Three buzzards circled overhead. Here was St James’s, Llangua, at the end of its working life. It was badly in need of friends, and I was glad to make its acquaintance.

Close to, it became obvious that the church was in trouble. It sits in a bend of the River Monnow, which often floods, and the porch was crusted with silt. Scaffolding held up the roof. Headstones poked above long grass like mountaintops through cloud.

“I don’t think anyone’s been in here for a while,” Rachel Morley said, unlocking the

door. “This church is on my mind a lot. I’m really worried about it.”

Ms Morley, an Irish woman in her thirties, is the director of Friends of Friendless Churches, a small [charity](#) dedicated to the rescue, repair, and reopening of [churches](#) in England and [Wales](#). Since its foundation in 1957, Friends has taken on 60 places of worship that were no longer in use.

These churches haunt the countryside. Stone revenants, relicts of villages that have vanished or all but vanished, they sit on salt marshes, in the shadows of mountains, on headlands overlooking the sea. They enclose the deep past; keep the centuries penned in like sheep. Often, these churches are looked after by a local volunteer, fiercely dutiful, who sees — or, rather, feels — their importance, and has decided to care for them.

That name, Friends of Friendless Churches, says a great deal. These are not guardians or champions. The tender but powerful idea of friendship better describes the relationship between people and place that is so much a part of the charity’s ethos. Think of the finger-rhyme: “Here’s the church and here’s the steeple” — well, that’s the Friends; taking old churches in hand.

We went inside. Light angled through diamond panes. Services were lit by candles in the darker months. But it had been two years since worship was last held, and, by the end, the congregation was down to two: a husband and wife. Now, the resident population consisted of a great many bees — an inhospitable order, hostile to visitors — that had made a cloister of the mossy uneven roof.

“I love these places because they are full of traces of the people who used them,” Ms Morley said. “The greasy timbers, the threadbare hassocks. When you see a worn step, like that one there, you think of the feet that went over it.

“Some of our churches are on pre-Christian sites; people have found something important about the spot for thousands of years, and so I think it’s very important that we acknowledge that, and don’t demolish them, and don’t sell them off as private spaces where no one else can go.”

She would like St James’s, which dates from the 14th century, to join the Friends’ portfolio, but the matter must be weighed. The case for: without proper attention, and soon, the church could fall down. The case against: it will cost £300,000 just to fix the roof and make the site safe — more income than the charity has in an

average year.

She is alert to the poetry of old buildings: “It would be so beautiful to put thatch on it, and a lovely white render on the walls. It would just glow. It would be such a happy church.” But she grapples daily with the prosaic realities of the balance sheet. Money is a constant and increasingly painful headache.

FRIENDS receives no state or church finance in England, and only a little in Wales. Yet the qualities that make ancient churches special are difficult to reconcile with the priorities of external funding bodies. There is no tick-box marked “intangible”, nor one marked “numinous”, and Ms Morley is often frustrated at being asked about a business plan.

“Give me a break,” she sighs at such moments. “It’s a church in the middle of a field. It’s a stone box with six benches. It doesn’t need a business plan. We’re going to gently, quietly, look after it, and you can go and visit it. But that’s not fundable. That’s never enough. I find that so infuriating and lonely.”

Lonely. An unusual expression to use in relation to the position of a charity in the heritage sector. Yet it does not feel inappropriate. Loneliness is a quality that these friendless churches often embody and emit. There is a particular elegiac pleasure to be had from visiting a church that is no longer in use, or used — as some are — for just one service a year. To walk into one of these buildings, especially alone, is to ache with a kind of exquisite sympathy: one solitary meeting another.

Is that sadness something that Ms Morley often feels? She nods. “Somebody said to me the other day that the Friends of Friendless Churches occupy a space between awe and melancholy. I think that sums it up perfectly. Our work is really melancholic. I see so many parish churches at the end of their life. They are venerable buildings, and it’s important to treat them with dignity and respect.” She laughed. “I’m talking about them almost as if they are people.”

They are, in a way. What makes them worthy of esteem and attention — their great age — also makes them vulnerable, especially those that are isolated. Most churches looked after by the Friends are in the countryside. These were built before the Industrial Revolution, serving large agrarian populations. The people have long since moved to the towns and cities, and, in an increasingly secular society, have

moved away from God.

Worshippers in historically significant rural churches are likely to be elderly, and shrinking in numbers. But it is up to these people, not the ecclesiastical or civil authorities, to raise the money to fix the guttering, renew the roof, pay the energy bills, and so on. This is a financial burden, but it is also emotional and psychological. It must feel to congregations as if the weight of history is pressing on their weary shoulders. No one wants the local church to close on their watch, and yet close they do.

THE Church of England has a formal process that governs how churches are closed, and their futures decided. Attempts are made, for a period of two years, sometimes more, to find an alternative use for the building. It may be sold or leased for housing or commercial use, generating important income. If no use can be found, the building may be vested in the [Churches Conservation Trust \(CCT\)](#), or demolished. The Friends, as an independent charity, can choose to take on churches which, for one reason or another, do not go to the CCT.

Between 1969 and 2021, the Church of England disposed of 2013 churches, of which 500 were demolished. There are widespread fears, however, that the pandemic and its aftermath will accelerate closures and selling-off. Friends estimates that a further 368 churches could close by 2026 — and that is just the C of E. Some 2000 or so churches across all denominations have closed in the past decade.

For years and years, there has been pessimism about the future of churches, but there is now a widespread feeling that the moment of crisis has arrived. We could call this a tipping point, but church people favour eschatological language. “We’re heading for the apocalypse,” one well-informed observer told me.

In most of the UK these buildings feel precarious and vulnerable. It has been estimated that Wales alone could lose up to 70 per cent of its places of worship over the next 20 years. The valleys are full of empty chapels; the chapels full of rotting organs; the organs full of ghost notes and dust. The problem is acute in that country, because a huge number of churches were built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by Nonconformist congregations that have since disbanded or

steeply dwindled.

Closures are so many and so frequent that even the heritage bodies cannot keep up with them. “Too often,” Christopher Catling, of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, writes, “the first we know of a disposal is when we drive past a chapel and see the broken-up pulpit and pews being piled into a skip, or the archives being heaped on to a bonfire.”

INSIDE the church at Llangua, which is Church of England even though it is in Wales, Ms Morley gave me the tour. We admired a medieval screen on which is painted a rather wonky Virgin and Child, and the statue of St James wearing a jaunty cockleshell in his hat. Her concern for the building and its contents was palpable: “This lovely wagon-roof is 16th-century, but you can see the whole thing is moving. Look at the massive cracks across that beam. Every single timber has snapped. We need to take it off and rebuild it. But I feel duty-bound to take it on. This is Ivor’s church. Our story starts from here.”

Friends of Friendless Churches is not a faith organisation, but it was founded by a man of great faith, Ivor Bulmer-Thomas, who saw these buildings themselves as holy. “An ancient and beautiful church fulfils its primary function merely by existing,” he believed. “It is, in itself, and irrespective of the members using it, an act of worship. A beautiful church, whether standing alone in the countryside, or surrounded by wharves and warehouses, offices and houses, is a perpetual reminder of spiritual values.”

There is, in other words, something in the stones. Such churches will have been consecrated by the priest or bishop who blessed them, but they have been anointed by human activity and emotion, too, over a long span of time. That people have come to pray, that they have brought their hope and anguish, their boredom during long services, their young to be baptised, and their dead to bury — all of that has been absorbed by the building. Break open a piece from an old church wall, and you might find joy and grief spiralling, ammonite-like, through the stone.

Ivor Thomas (Bulmer, the maiden name of his second wife, Joan, was added later) has rather fallen out of history, and deserves to be put back in. He was born in Cwmbran, Monmouthshire, in 1905, the second youngest of four children in a

working-class family. His father, a stoker in a brick factory, died in the flu pandemic of 1919.

It was expected that Ivor would have to leave school and get a job, but his older sister Beatrice, a seamstress, recognising that he was very bright, offered to do more to support the family so that he could continue his education. He won a scholarship to St John's College, Oxford, taking a double first in mathematics and classics, and making a name as a middle-distance runner of international standing. He also had a gift for languages: Dante, in medieval Italian, was his idea of bedtime reading.

Having given serious consideration to joining the Anglican priesthood, he became first a journalist, and then a Labour MP. He entered Parliament in 1942, and went on to join the post-war government of Clement Attlee, whom he loathed. In 1948, unwilling to support the nationalisation of steel, he resigned from the party. After a period as an independent, he switched to the Conservatives, but was not re-elected.

Were one to draw a family tree of European politics and culture during the 20th century, Bulmer-Thomas would be an important point of connection. He met Mussolini in Rome (he did intelligence work during the war, writing anti-fascist propaganda leaflets that were flown over Italy and dropped from planes), and Einstein in London. His children remember T. S. Eliot and John Betjeman coming for tea, and Roy Jenkins playing croquet in the garden.

He was a romantic figure, given to the grand gesture. After losing his seat in the House of Commons in 1950, he and a couple of pals drove from London to Dakar, crossing — or, almost crossing — the Sahara in a Ford V-Eight. When the car broke down on the last leg, they were marooned in the desert for four days, keeping themselves going on tea and oranges until the rescue party arrived.

Raised as a Baptist, Thomas joined the Church of England while at university. In April 1932, he married Dilys Jones, the daughter of a surgeon from Merthyr Tydfil. A black and gold plaque on a wall inside the church at Llangua records, in Latin, that she died on 16 August 1938. She was 28. She had given birth to a son, Michael, in the early summer of that year. He was adopted, following his mother's death, by a Scottish couple, Charles and Isobel Walker, a doctor and his wife.

MICHAEL WALKER is now a retired teacher. When I contacted him, he told me

that his birth mother had been suffering from post-natal depression — “which, of course, wasn’t understood in the 1930s”. Newspaper reports record the result of an inquest: she had fallen 40 feet from the window of a nursing home in Hampstead, where she had been a patient for the previous ten days. The doctor who treated her testified that she had been suffering from delusions. Bulmer-Thomas told the coroner that his wife had had a breakdown after childbirth. “No darkling fears,” he later wrote, “Can touch her now.”

Grieving, he found consolation in English and Italian poetry, and began to write himself. His poem *Dilysia: A threnody*, from which the above quotation is taken, was circulated privately among friends in 1939. In 1954, by which time he had remarried, he rescued St James’s from dereliction, intending that act as a further tribute to his first wife. She was thus twice memorialised — first in paper, and then in stone.

“He was very badly affected by her death,” Victor Bulmer-Thomas, Ivor’s son from his second marriage, told me. “The poem is beautiful. He never wrote any other poetry, but it’s extraordinary. And he would always go and put flowers on her grave every year. I think he was very much in love with her.” Victor’s sister Miranda added: “I think my father sanctified Dilys.”

Out of this moment of personal sorrow came the modern church conservation movement. Bulmer-Thomas’s restoration work at Llangua can be seen as a dry run for his establishment, three years later, of the Friends of Friendless Churches, and, in 1969, what is now the Churches Conservation Trust — the two principal organisations that save churches in England and Wales.

It is as if, having already lost so much, he was unwilling to accept further losses. When, in 1957, he witnessed the demolition of the church of St Peter the Less, in Chichester, he could not help but weep. The Friends took on its first building in 1972: the surviving tower of Old St Matthew’s, in Lightcliffe, West Yorkshire, the rest of the church being demolished.

THOSE early years were exhilarating. There was a certain feeling of knightly quest: the chivalric thrill of rescuing a building in distress; the sense that you were on the side of civilisation and against barbarism. An outsider’s brag, too, perhaps: that

they, the Friends, could see something in these decaying churches that others could not.

Fr Philip Gray, a priest in his eighties, has been a member of the organisation since he was 16 years old, when he wrote to Bulmer-Thomas that he was worried about a church in Suffolk at risk of being knocked down. "I take the view that a church is a sacrament of stone," he explained when we spoke on the telephone. "It absolutely points at things of God, much more than a priest does in his sermon. If you lose your church, something goes in your community."

Ivor Bulmer-Thomas died at home in London in 1993, aged 87. His legacy? "Some of the most glorious buildings in the country are safe because of what he did," Matthew Saunders, a former director of the Friends, told me.

Ms Morley keeps on her desk, in a clear 1950s butter dish, a piece of supporting timber from St Mary's, Mundon. She had brought it with her to Llangua. "Maybe I'm sentimental," she said, passing me the dish, "but this I really love." The wood looked crumbly, more air than tree, honeycombed by the larvae of deathwatch beetle. This artefact once belonged to Ivor Bulmer-Thomas, who had kept it on his desk. It acts now as a reminder to the present director of the scale of the challenge facing the organisation she leads.

The work is never ending, and is likely, over the next few years, to become more pressing and intense. Ms Morley is in the salvation business, and there are a great many churches to save. This takes cash, of course, and energy and will, but also a willingness to attend to the small fond duties that keep a place going.

After she was finished at St James's, she planned to head over to St Peter's, at Llancillo, and sweep it out. Then it would be on to the 12th-century chapel at Urishay, where the grass needed cutting. Unglamorous chores, but she was in no doubt about their necessity and worth.

"These buildings transcend time," she said. "They are the spiritual investment and the artistic legacy of generations, and a community's greatest expression of itself over centuries. There's a concentration of shared human experience within their walls, which means that churches like this are a monument to the lives of thousands of ordinary people who have been completely forgotten about. This is their gift to the future."

This is an edited extract from Steeple Chasing: Around Britain by church by Peter Ross, published by Headline at £22 ([Church Bookshop £19.80](#)); 978-1-4722-8192-0.

Since the book was published, [Friends of Friendless Churches](#) has been awarded a grant by the National Heritage Memorial Fund which has allowed them to bring St James's, Llangua, into their care, though more funding is required to complete repair works.

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