



By Oliver Bennett

**T**HE Nativity crib, flickering candlelight, carol singing and the rich scent of myrrh – perchance even a mildly lubricated Midnight Mass. For many of us Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without a visit to a church. These are the buildings to which we seasonally gravitate, and for good reason – they plunge us headfirst into the spirit of the season.

So it's poignant that Christmas is often the only time of the year that many of us will enter a church. Like poetry, churches seem to be increasingly reserved for special occasions – even weddings and funerals don't necessarily take place in them any longer. As traditional attendances are in free-fall, these extraordinarily rich buildings are in peril of being left neglected. About 20 churches close a year and in rural dioceses some 40 per cent of worshippers are over the age of 70 – hardly a recipe for sustainability.

Which is a shame, as churches and cathedrals are places of beauty that act as meeting places and sanctuaries, including that annual carol concert. So it's just as well that there's a gathering movement to bring people back to them – just not as places of worship.

Indeed, 2019 could be the year when churches really started to think about how to attract new audiences.

Last summer, Rochester Cathedral put a crazy golf course in its nave while Norwich Cathedral hosted a helter skelter. This was all too outré for some – of Rochester's pitch and putt the Right Reverend Dr Gavin Ashenden, Bishop of the Christian Episcopal Church, said: "I'm afraid I think it's a really serious mistake, perhaps born of desperation." But it got attention.

And such innovations are changing ideas about how underused church buildings might be repopulated. Over the past 20 years, there's been an increasing number of imaginative responses to dying churches.

**A**N EARLY example was St Paul's Bristol which became Circomedia – a circus school – in 2004. "It's now a citywide landmark and since opening has received various awards," says Peter Aiers, CEO of the Churches Conservation Trust, the charity that protects over 350 church buildings in England.

Malmesbury Abbey in Wiltshire is one of a few churches that sometimes morphs into a skateboarding park. There's also Champing, or "camping in churches", started in 2017 to invite guests to bivouac in the naves and aisles of churches for a smallish fee, and which has been a great success.

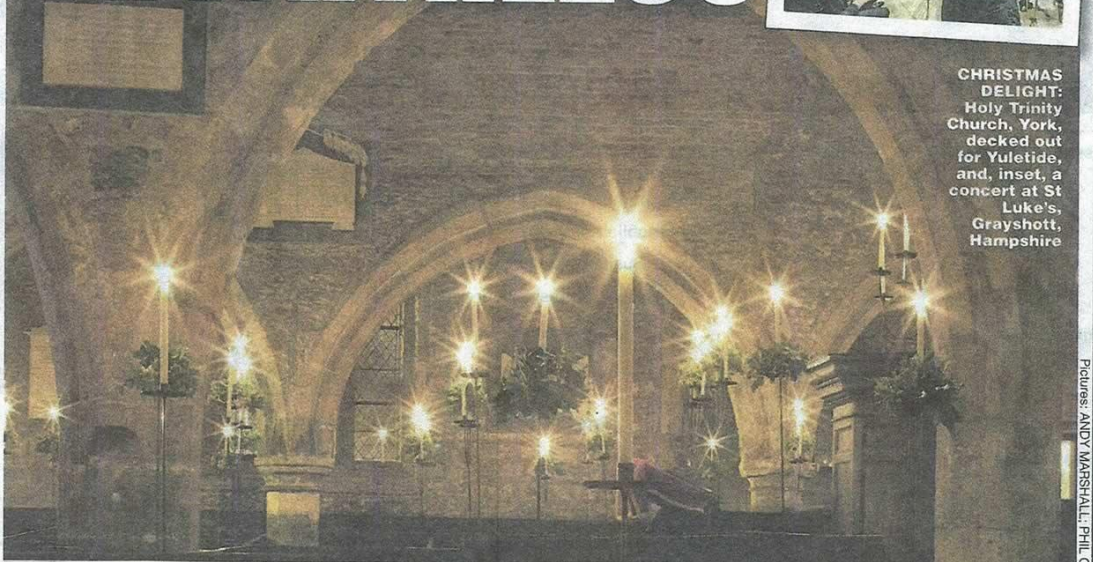
And churches have stepped in to plug a gap, such as the postal service set up at St Peter's, in Belmont Village near Bolton, following the closure of the local post office – it also offers full English breakfasts on a Friday morning.

As Peter Aiers says: "We've been

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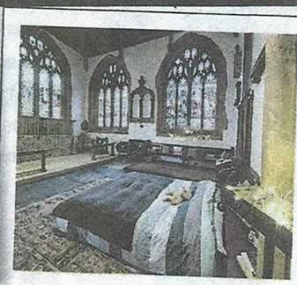
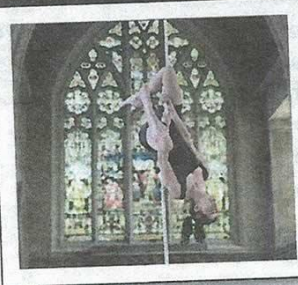


**CHRISTMAS DELIGHT:** Holy Trinity Church, York, decked out for Yuletide, and, inset, a concert at St Luke's, Grayshott, Hampshire



Many of us only enter churches at Christmas to belt out a few carols. But across the UK, they are attracting people back with music, camping, post offices – even a circus school

**VERSATILE:** Circomedia at St Paul's, Bristol, and 'Champing' at All Saints, Langport, Somerset



able to work on a number of projects that give new life to historic churches." Climbing walls, dance studios, you name it – almost anything is preferable to churches sitting empty, he believes. Provided it isn't sacrilegious.

There remain huge challenges facing the Church of England's 15,700 church buildings, and a lack of central funding has led to suggestions that they instead be looked after by local communities.

At a recent cathedrals conference, Dr John Inge, the Bishop of Worcester and a prime mover in the repurposing of churches, said: "Far too many churches remain locked... and stand like mausoleums." The Church of England recently accepted the idea that some churches should become "festival churches" that are not used for a weekly service. Others are saved by the will and imagination of local people.

Take Peter and Vivien Harrison, of Grayshott, Hampshire. Recently, at local church St Luke's, their charity Grayshott Concerts hosted the world premiere of a contempo-

rary composition by Sir Karl Jenkins CBE, the UK's most-performed living composer. How did they do it? "About 15 years ago we saw an article on the church, saying it was struggling," says Peter, 81. "We decided to put on a concert. Then the village asked: 'When's the next one?'"

Peter now puts on four or five concerts a year, entertaining thousands. St Luke's has been adapted to take up to 375 people, including a 40-strong orchestra, and attracts titans of the classical world like violinist Nicola Benedetti. "She couldn't believe she'd get this kind of response in a village church," says Peter. "But it's a great venue and the acoustics are fantastic."

"At the beginning we did have people saying, 'This is a church, not

a concert hall'. But now they seem more happy. After all, they have an alternative to the Royal Albert Hall at the end of their road." On March 13, 2020 the event will be top pianist and conductor Howard Shelley's 70th birthday concert with the London Mozart Players.

**I**T'S the kind of initiative the Churches Conservation Trust would approve of. Now in its 50th year, under Aiers, the Trust has started to promote alternative uses for churches.

Some make the argument that it takes us back to the medieval period when they were full of secular activity such as minstrels, ven-

dors and sometimes miscreants. All this changed into po-faced piety in the Puritan and Victorian eras. "Church-secular partnerships have had a really positive impact," says Aiers. "We have a huge challenge and inevitably we're seeing more historic churches having secular uses."

It gives them a new lease of life and sometimes more. As June Rodgers, chancellor of the Diocese of Gloucester, put it: "Visiting a church on holiday and writing in the visitors' book 'So peaceful... so English' does not deal with the gutters, the damp or the bats."

Peter Harrison at Grayshott Concerts says: "Churches are fantastic venues that look good, have a great sense of occasion, and are perfect for all kinds of events – especially at Christmas," he says. "As for concert programmes like ours, I can't understand why more churches don't do it." He even thinks it might have stimulated a return to worship at St Luke's.

So as you go to the local carol service and belt out the top notes of Ding Dong Merrily On High spare a thought: like dogs, churches are not just for Christmas.

grayshottconcerts.co.uk

Pictures: ANDY MARSHALL; PHIL DUNN; JOSEPH CASEY/ICCT