

## St Barbara, patron saint of gutters

'Stave off decay by daily care,' William Morris urged. Innovative projects are following him in ensuring that churches are inspected and basic maintenance is carried out.



Rob Forrester of Forrester Access clears the gutters at Priory Church of the Annunciation, Inchbrook, Stroud for GutterClear, Maintain our Heritage's scheme in Gloucestershire (Photos: Jonathan Taylor)

In the past few years the sound of free-running gutters on historic places of worship has become louder, with innovative projects being created to ensure that this most basic element of building maintenance is undertaken. Places of worship across the land, most notably in the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, the Diocese of London and the Diocese of Gloucester, have been pioneering attempts to provide centralised gutter maintenance services to the parishes and volunteers who care for these magnificent buildings.

Most historic churches in this country are looked after by volunteers who raise the finance, organise the work and tend to these buildings with an impressive commitment. It is easy to forget that these people do more to protect England's heritage than any other volunteer body. It is important that the conservation profession, and those responsible for legislation and taxation, consider how it can help make good maintenance easily attainable and cost effective.

While the conservation profession has power at its disposal to help prevent the loss of fabric by unsympathetic alteration and repair, there has not been much to offer back to the parishes and congregations to help them to maintain their buildings. Although the major grant scheme for places of worship provided by English Heritage and the Heritage Lottery Fund does insist on a maintenance plan as a condition of the application, the grants can only help towards high-level

repairs costing over £10,000. This is as it should be, but the real trick will be to ensure that the applications for major works are required only in instances where there is a problem not caused by a lack of basic maintenance. Is this perhaps a vision of the future?

The benefits of regular maintenance are well known to all of those who work with historic buildings, the most significant being reduced repair liability, better planning of long-term repair conditions and early identification of problems. There is a clear message which the SPAB has been promoting with its annual maintenance week. 'Stave off decay by daily care,' as William Morris put it. This year National Maintenance Week begins on 21 November, and will culminate with National Gutters Day. This annual event makes the very important point that the need for maintenance does not go away. The IHBC and SPAB have published *A Stitch in Time*, a guide to building maintenance which can be found at [www.ihbc.org.uk/stitch\\_in\\_time.htm](http://www.ihbc.org.uk/stitch_in_time.htm).

Maintain our Heritage ran a pilot scheme, funded by English Heritage, in Bath between 2002 and 2003. The aim was to investigate whether a maintenance inspection service could be set up and run. The service was successful but it was mostly aimed at private property. The inspiration for the pilot was the Dutch system of care called Monumentenwacht whereby crafts people survey historic buildings equipped with materials and tools so that they can



undertake appropriate repairs on the spot. Maintain our Heritage would come back to churches later on with the GutterClear service, launched in the Diocese of Gloucester in 2007.

In the meantime the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich and the Diocese of London were undertaking pilot schemes to see if there was a way to deliver a centralised gutter-maintenance scheme to their parishes. A pilot scheme was set up by the diocese in cooperation with English Heritage in 2005 (to finish in 2008), to provide regular, simple maintenance for parish churches.

The pilot area was the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, which covers the west of the county of Suffolk. The 70 churches signed up to the scheme represent just fewer than half of the 159 parish churches in the archdeaconry. An initial questionnaire revealed that most parochial church councils (PCCs) questioned had no regular maintenance programme.

Four contractors known for their expertise on church buildings were chosen to carry out the work. All the contractors followed the same schedule of work. They were given a cluster of churches around their location and were asked to price the work for a period of three years. The parish paid one third of the cost and English Heritage grant aided two thirds. The contractor would make an appointment and would visit with the churchwarden present. Once the work had been completed the churchwarden would sign off the job sheet and hand it to the contractor. The job sheet would include a note of any defects discovered during the work.

The scheme has operated for two years. A follow-up questionnaire sent to the PCCs within the scheme after the first year showed that the system worked well and was much appreciated. The majority stated that they would not continue with routine maintenance if they did not receive a grant. The diocese is presently seeking further funds to continue this service to the parishes.

The Diocese of London undertook a pilot scheme in 2005–06 to assess the potential for creating a centralised gutter maintenance programme. The pilot aimed to ensure that some gutters were cleared and to see what lessons could be learnt. The project (named the St Barbara Pilot Project, as this was the nearest to a patron saint of gutters that we could find) was undertaken in the Charing Cross Archdeaconry and was supported by English Heritage. A questionnaire was created and the gutters were cleared. The questionnaires demonstrated that there was the stomach for a scheme and the preparedness to pay for it.

The main difference in this pilot compared to that at St Edmundsbury and Ipswich was that it identified how to reduce the cost to the parish without relying on a large subsidy. The pilot tried out two contractors. It looked at the potential for combining the visit to maintain the vicarage with the visit to maintain the church. The pilot was a success. The diocese indicated that it was prepared to invest in clearing the gutters of

the 100 poorest parishes in the diocese as well as the parsonages, if a scheme could be set up.

The full scheme was launched in autumn 2006. The price per visit was negotiated based on the volume of the work. A reporting format was set up whereby digital photographs supported a simple tick list assessing the condition of the building visited, easily identifying any high-level problems. This reporting format continues to be refined. The scheme now has more than 180 customers across the diocese. The scheme does not rely on any external funding, although English Heritage continues to support the administrative costs.

The Diocese of Gloucester GutterClear project was launched in 2007. Rather than defining a pilot area, the scheme has been running a pilot phase. The significant difference from the other schemes is that this involves a third party (Maintain our Heritage) working with the diocese to set up the project and provide funding. As a result, the scheme is open to all denominations. The basis of the project is to negotiate a good rate from the contractor, who is able to access the buildings safely and efficiently. The contractor is expected to produce a report highlighting obvious defects. The scheme set up by Maintain our Heritage provides a part-time administrator employed by the Diocese of Gloucester.

The schemes selected contractors to work with rather than specifically tendering the work. It is assumed that this is because there was a real need to ensure quality and that access would be undertaken with due regard to health and safety.

The difference in the findings from St Edmundsbury and Ipswich and London over attitudes to maintenance and paying for it are stark. Is this a case of marketing the schemes better or is there really this difference in attitude? Each scheme has a particular approach. There might not be a clear model which can be rolled out across the country. It seems clear that the challenges of clearing the gutters of rural churches are different to those of urban ones. From an external funding perspective there is great merit in a scheme which is open to all faiths and denominations. It is important to find the model which provides value for money and quality, and to ensure that the customers are prepared to support it and that there are contractors prepared to deliver it.

What has not been achieved is the equivalent of the Monumentenwacht scheme, whereby repairs are undertaken while the contractor is on site clearing the gutters. It seems that this is because the places of worship have to pay for repairs and the costs of repair need to be transparent. One idea to overcome this is to tender a large group of basic maintenance repairs over all the sites in the scheme and provide the contractor with a timescale to achieve them.

The Churches Conservation Trust (CCT) is working with the Deanery of Greater Northampton and the east midlands team at English Heritage to establish whether it may be possible to deliver a maintenance service to local churches on the back of the work that the CCT already undertakes on its sites.

[www.london.anglican.org/gutters](http://www.london.anglican.org/gutters)  
[www.visitchurches.org.uk](http://www.visitchurches.org.uk)  
[www.gutterclear.org](http://www.gutterclear.org)  
[www.stedmundsbury.anglican.org](http://www.stedmundsbury.anglican.org)

*Peter Aiers is major projects manager for the Churches Conservation Trust, responsible for the future of around 10 urban priority churches, including All Souls, and for developing the trust's regeneration programme.*