



## 'A Serious House on Serious Earth': Towards an Understanding of the Church of England's Inheritance of Buildings

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### ABSTRACT

The Church of England is blessed with an extraordinary inheritance of church buildings. However, this inheritance, particularly in rural contexts, is increasingly being viewed as a financial millstone and encumbrance to mission. This article takes issue with the largely 'functional' understanding of church buildings which is common place in the Church of England. It will argue that there needs to be a rediscovery of the symbolic and sacramental power of buildings. By reasserting the sacramental and symbolic power of church buildings we can come again to recognize how all church buildings – and not just those blessed with a great history or soaring architecture – exist in part to articulate the ongoing presence and activity of God in creation.

**KEYWORDS:** church architecture, Church of England, David Brown, Durham, heritage, mission, Robin Gill, rural church, sacraments

### *Introduction*

Philip Larkin's poem 'Church Going' tells of the quiet solitary visit of a touring cyclist to a small church in the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> The visitor, who we

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2. William Whyte's recently published essay 'The Ethics of the Empty Church: Anglicanism's Need for a Theology of Architecture', *Journal of Anglican Studies* 13.2 (2015), pp. 172-88 also reflects on the challenges and opportunities presented by church buildings through a reflection on Larkin's poem 'Church Going'. It is a coincidence that this paper was first conceived and written as a reflection on the same poem. This coincidence is also a sign of the power and relevance of Larkin's

imagine to be Larkin himself, is not a regular Church goer, entering the building only 'Once I am sure there's nothing going on'.<sup>3</sup> Through the opening stanzas of the poem Larkin, in what feel to be very contemporary terms, describes a morbid fascination with the seeming anachronism of this simple, fading place which he initially reflects 'was not worth stopping for'. In time Larkin muses on the fact that he did stop, and that he often does stop, at these small churches and begins to think what will happen when these churches fall into disrepair and out of use as he imagines they inevitably will. Some will become museums, he thinks, but others will become fallen down places of half-remembered memory: 'A shape less recognisable each week/ A purpose more obscure.' Even through these musings, however, Larkin cannot shake the simple eloquence of this church, where 'It pleases me to stand in silence here.' This church, he reflects, is not a forgotten artefact or a decaying relic but 'A serious house on serious earth ... In whose blent air all our compulsions meet.' There is, Larkin states, something of power and worth simply in the ongoing fact of this building which cannot be imagined away, which 'much never can be obsolete'.

This essay explores with more depth the enduring power that church buildings – not just those blessed with a good history or soaring architecture – play on the mission of the Church of England; the power that these serious houses on serious earth play in the life of the Church and in the imagination of wider society. This reflection draws from my own experience on a placement in the Parish of Alston Moor in the Diocese of Newcastle and more broadly my current experience as a vicar of two parishes about thirty miles downstream from Alston in the South Tyne Valley. Through this reflection I will first examine the practical issues the Church of England faces through its inheritance of church buildings, particularly in rural areas. By examining some contemporary responses to this problem, I will argue that we need to understand not only the functional purpose, but also the symbolic importance of buildings in the life and witness of the Church. I will argue that we need to re-find the importance of church buildings as sacramental symbols if we are to fully appreciate their importance not

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poem in helping the Church reflect on its inheritance of buildings. Where Whyte's essay presents an historical response to this challenge, this essay acts as a theological reflection to this same question.

3. 'Church Going' in Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), pp. 58-59.

only to the life of the Church, but to the witness and mission of the Church within wider society.

My argument will draw on the work of David Brown, until recently Professor of Theology, Aesthetics, and Culture at St Andrew's University. Brown's work, in particular his trilogy of books beginning with his 2004 work *God and Enchantment of Place*, has substantially enriched the contemporary understanding of sacramental theology.<sup>4</sup> I will argue that our inheritance of buildings provides not only a crucial resource for the work of the Church, but a deep and recurring sacramental sign of God's activity in creation; reclaiming the symbolic importance of church buildings, seeing the simple fact of these buildings as having power and agency in themselves. By reasserting this simple, but often overlooked fact, it is possible to begin to answer William Whyte's question: 'How can Anglicans care for their churches without either desacralizing them or turning them into tangible evidence of decline?'<sup>5</sup> This article provides a theological response to this question, and through this provides a firmer foundation to our understanding of what it is to be a church with such a rich inheritance of buildings.

#### *The Church of England's Inheritance Buildings in the Rural Church*

It is hard to hide from the facts of church buildings in rural England. There are approximately 9600 rural churches in the care of the Church of England. That means that of the approximately 16,000 churches in 13,000 or so Church of England parishes, around 60 per cent are in rural locations.<sup>6</sup> The weight of this inheritance of buildings in the rural

4. For a summary of Brown's re-conceiving of sacramental theology see David Brown, 'Re-conceiving the Sacramental' in Geoffrey Rowell and Christine Hall (eds.), *The Gestures of God* (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 21-36. Also see David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); David Brown, *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); David Brown, *God and Mystery in Words: Experience through Metaphor and Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For overviews of Brown's theological output, and particularly his sacramental vision, see Robert MacSwain and Taylor Worley (eds.), *Theology, Aesthetics and Culture: Responses to the Work of David Brown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Robert MacSwain '“A Generous God”: The Sacramental Vision of David Brown', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 15.2 (2015), pp. 139-50.

5. Whyte, 'The Ethics of the Empty Church', p. 185.

6. James Bell, Jill Hopkinson and Trevor Willmott (eds.), *Re-shaping Rural Ministry: A Theological and Practical Handbook* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009),

church is played out on Alston Moor where there are six church buildings serving a population of approximately 2500 people. Compare this to Monkseaton in suburban North Tyneside where one church serves a population of over 8000 people, and the nearest six church buildings serve a combined population of close to 50,000 people.<sup>7</sup> It is not immediately helpful to make direct comparison between the experience and context of the rural church with either the wider church, or with another specific context. However, simple comparisons such as these throw into sharp relief the scale of the inheritance of buildings to the rural church, so much so that it has become common for the work on rural ministry to focus particularly on the weight of this inheritance. Sally Gaze has argued powerfully that we can no longer hide from the burden of this inheritance. Declining numbers of faithful members of worshipping communities, the increased expectation that all buildings will be converted to be more accessible for all, the difficulty in converting buildings which are often listed to be suitable for wider community use, means that the rural church, in the words of Bob Jackson, is in danger of being 'crushed by its own heritage'.<sup>8</sup>

At the heart of this dilemma lies the sheer number of church buildings in rural England. This creates the commonly held belief that there was a by-gone age when these buildings were once full. Interestingly a column in *The Guardian* on Kirkaugh Holy Paraclete, one of the churches in the Parish of Alston Moor, makes this assumption when it comments, 'in its heyday it would have been a devotional landmark for about 250 parishioners ... Now the congregation must be miniscule.'<sup>9</sup> This comment is in keeping with an assumption that there was an earlier age, during the 'heyday' of the Christendom model of church, when the numbers of people regularly attending church, and the higher esteem with which the Church was held within local

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p. 14; 'Report of the Church Buildings Review Group', available at: [https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2383717/church\\_buildings\\_review\\_report\\_2015.pdf](https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2383717/church_buildings_review_report_2015.pdf), pp. 5-6 (accessed 3 November 2016).

7. Figures taken from the *Newcastle Diocesan Yearbook: 2011-2012*, pp. 158-59, 235-43.

8. Bob Jackson, *Hope for the Church: Contemporary Strategies for Growth* (London: Church House Publishing, 2002), p. 4; Sally Gaze, *Mission-shaped and Rural: Growing Churches in the Countryside* (London: Church House Publishing, 2006), pp. 91-93.

9. Phil Gates, 'Country Diary, Wednesday 10 April, 2013', available at: [www.guardian.co.uk/environment/the-northerner/2013/apr/10/kirkaugh-south-tyne-valley-black-forest](http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/the-northerner/2013/apr/10/kirkaugh-south-tyne-valley-black-forest) (accessed 3 November 2016).

communities, allowed the Church of England's volume of church buildings to be absorbed more easily than now.<sup>10</sup> It is certainly the case that for many the fact that the pews in our churches are so often – at best – only half full lies at the heart of the issue. As Jeffrey Cox has argued, 'the empty church is the single most important piece of evidence brought forth by people who argue that religion has become unimportant'.<sup>11</sup>

Robin Gill, however, has taught us that we need to be careful not to look too wistfully back to a bygone age when we consider our contemporary inheritance of church buildings. In *The Myth of the Empty Church* Gill has shown that we cannot simply assume that there was a former time when the church buildings, in whatever context, were once full. Analysing records in rural churches in Northumberland, an area very similar to that covered by the Parish of Alston Moor, Gill shows that in 1901 only about 22 per cent of church seats were occupied on an average Sunday. Through his analysis Gill shows that church building through the latter part of the nineteenth century did not take place to meet an increased demand in the population, or growing populations in general. Instead all denominations built more buildings (particularly in the case of Nonconformist denominations), and larger churches (in the case of the Church of England) when there was not the immediate need for them. The reasons for this period of building during a numerical decline in church attendance are varied and complex. Gill shows that the fact of building during a time of numerical decline did not halt this decline, but rather accelerated it. Larger more expensive buildings, with the inherent costs and debt that these buildings brought about, coupled with fewer regular worshippers meeting in more buildings, and increasingly stretched clergy, made the decline and closure of churches inevitable.<sup>12</sup>

This pattern of church building, attendance, and closure across the denominations that Gill describes in rural Northumberland is mirrored on Alston Moor. The Nonconformist denominations, particularly the Methodist Church, which has a long and strong tradition in the area, were once served by many chapels and buildings. For instance, the small settlement of Garagill once had three Methodist chapels of different traditions alone. However, the Methodist Church on Alston Moor no longer owns any places of worship, with the remaining congregation worshipping in St Wulstan's Roman Catholic Church

10. Gaze, *Mission-shaped*, p. 93.

11. Jeffrey Cox, *The English Church in a Secular Society: Lambeth 1870–1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 276.

12. Robin Gill, *The 'Empty' Church Revisited* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 27–36.

in Alston. By contrast the Church of England has not closed any of its church buildings on Alston Moor. But the pattern of building, and their current organization, again follows Gill's analysis. Of the six churches in the Parish of Alston Moor only St John the Evangelist in Nenthead was built during the period of church building that Gill describes. The other five churches were all built during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to replace buildings linked to ancient foundations. St Mary and St Patrick in Lambley can trace its founding back to a nearby mediaeval convent dissolved at the Reformation.<sup>13</sup> There is evidence of a church on the site of St Augustine's in Alston from the twelfth century, and similar evidence on the site of St John's in Garagill.<sup>14</sup> Both Kirkaugh Holy Paraclete and St Jude's in Knarsdale were served by a Rector as early as the twelfth century, and evidence of Saxon Christianity has been found at both churches.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the pattern of church building, and the inheritance of church buildings across the denominations identified by Gill are mirrored by the patterns we encounter on Alston Moor. As Gill shows, Nonconformist buildings saw a sharp increase and equally sharp decline, Anglican church building 'might be described – like the local Cheviot – as a flat hill' with the churches built through the nineteenth century being maintained where other denominations closed their buildings. The main reason for this difference, Gill argues, is the subsidized funding structure of the Church of England which has allowed Anglican churches to remain open in areas where other denominations, which were usually required to be financially self-supporting, have largely disappeared. The irony of this, Gill states, is that even with the subsidized nature of the Church of England, rationalization has had to be sought. This, however, has not come about through the closure of church buildings, but the amalgamation of parishes so that Anglican clergy often exist in rural areas in an effective state of clerical pluralism.<sup>16</sup> Alston Moor is no exception to this, with the six churches of the Parish being served by one full-time stipendiary priest.

Gill's analysis and the reality of rural parishes such as Alston Moor only heightens the perception that there are fewer clergy, and fewer people, to run and maintain the same number of buildings. Sally Gaze has argued that the inheritance of church buildings, which as we have

13. Geoffrey Purves (ed.), *Church of Newcastle and Northumberland: A Sense of Place* (Tempus: Stroud, 2006), p. 106.

14. Purves, *Churches of Newcastle and Northumberland*, pp. 101-102.

15. Purves, *Churches of Newcastle and Northumberland*, p. 105.

16. Gill, *Empty*, pp. 36-37.

seen is almost unique to the Church of England in rural areas, is becoming an increasingly visible burden on the ongoing life and mission of the church in these places. There is, she argues, a commitment to church buildings which has become disabling to the church in certain contexts. The buildings themselves have become what Gaze describes as 'transitional objects'. Transitional objects carry with them an unconscious significance, which cause resistance to change in organizations and communities. Just as a child uses a transitional object such as a soft toy or a blanket to help them cope as they grow and develop, so communities at times of change use transitional objects to reassure them about their place and status in the world. However, in time, just as the child learns to live without their trusted possession, so communities can learn to thrive without a reliance on the transitional object which has, to that point, provided their point of reference and understanding. As Gaze states:

As a Church, we are an organisation coping with massive amounts of societal change and so the monuments in stone, which recall past glories and enduring worship down the ages, acquire an even greater symbolic importance. Transitional theory would suggest that unwillingness to close buildings even when they no longer effectively serve the church community's mission arise because the buildings have become transitional phenomena in which members have invested their sense of identity. Change will only occur when people have had time and space for exploration of what their identity as church is so that they are prepared to relinquish what they hold dear for the sake of acquiring something new.<sup>17</sup>

Central to Gaze's argument is a call for the Church of England, particularly in rural areas, to stop the church building being the 'unalterable starting point' of the life of the church, and to find sustainable solutions to the question of the Church's inheritance of buildings and, if necessary, find the courage to close some buildings for the sake of the kingdom.<sup>18</sup>

In recent years there have been many creative attempts to find a sustainable solution to this problem; however, these begin with the viability and functionality of the buildings. The recent Church of England report by the Church Buildings Review Group has encouraged the development of 'Festival Churches'. These are church buildings which are open for occasional offices and major festivals, but not used for regular worship because of the very small regular attendance.<sup>19</sup>

17. Gaze, *Mission-shaped*, pp. 94-95.

18. Gaze, *Mission-shaped*, p. 97.

19. 'Report of Church Buildings Review Group', p. 34.



Another option is for some buildings to be passed over to the care of the Churches Conservation Trust. In some areas, the cost of maintaining and repairing the church building has been removed from the worshipping community, and placed into the local charitable trust.<sup>20</sup> In other cases the difficult decision has been made to close the building as a place of worship passing it onto another community use or, as has been the case with many former Nonconformist chapels, being converted into private dwellings. Each of these offers possible solutions to the problem as outlined above, however not all of these are always possible or even desirable solutions. For instance, the state of government funding is such that it is increasingly difficult for churches to be passed into the care of the Churches Conservation Trust. In addition to this Alan Smith has called into question the general desirability of other possible solutions. Writing from his experience of his ministry as an Archdeacon and Bishop in the rural church he argues that many of the trusts which have been set up to support local church buildings have been run by former members of that church. In these cases, where regular worship has ceased in that building those people have not transferred to worship at another church but simply ceased to attend church, and the money the new trust can raise from the local community does not match what was raised before the ownership church was transferred to the trust. Equally, Smith argues, closing churches is a far from simple act. Drawing from his direct experience Smith shows that even when agreement to close a church is met the hidden costs of closing a church – removal of asbestos, exhumation and moving of graves, fencing off the remaining church yard, legal costs – are very often not covered by the money raised by the sale. Behind these practical problems lies a more fundamental truth for Smith, that closing church buildings is rarely the answer. In fact he argues that ‘what evidence we have suggests that a policy of closing rural churches, at least in the short and medium term, is a very effective way of planning decline’.<sup>21</sup>

What this shows is not only that the Church of England’s inheritance of church buildings provides a particular challenge to the Church in rural England, but also that there is no simple solution to this question which can be solved by central planning or rationalization. It is clear that when the church begins with the practical opportunities and issues that buildings present, no simple solution offers itself to the presenting issue. Instead the Church needs to take seriously our inheritance of

20. Gaze, *Mission-shaped*, p. 91.

21. Alan Smith, *God-Shaped Mission: Theological and Practical Perspectives from the Rural Church* (Norwich: Canterbury, 2008), pp. 22-24.



church buildings not simply as a practical encumbrance, but as part of what God gives us to do and realize God's mission in a given place. There is a need, as Gaze has identified, for us to look more maturely and realistically at our church buildings. However, for this to be the case we need to understand our buildings not simply as functional objects which serve the mission of a particular church community, but as places bearing witness to God's commitment to God's creation; simple visible facts bearing witness to the ongoing presence and power of God's mission in creation.

*Beyond Function – Re-finding the Symbolic Power of Church Buildings*

The over-emphasis of the contemporary Church on the purely functional purpose of its buildings masks the deep symbolic power of all current and former places of worship. Paul Chambers has shown that all formerly religious buildings, not just great cathedrals but seemingly mundane and ordinary buildings, have a power to affect our religious imagination. In a study of redundant Welsh Nonconformist chapels, Chambers has argued that many buildings which formerly housed Nonconformist congregations retain a double life in our religious experience. On one hand, they suggest the seemingly inevitable decline of traditional religion. These empty buildings provide a 'silent testimony' both to the absence of a living religion, but also a reminder of a lost way of life when religion was an integral part of community life.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, Chambers argues, they retain a tenacious symbolic power: 'as long as these buildings remain, people will continue to have religion constantly "flagged" in their consciousness and the chains of memory will not be completely broken'.<sup>23</sup> What Chambers' analysis reminds us, and which is too often forgotten, is the agency that these buildings possess as things in themselves, shaping and embodying the conscious and unconscious religious experiences of those who encounter them. Chambers' analysis, which draws on the insights of David Morgan and other scholars of 'material religion', reminds us of the deep role of material objects in the definition of religious experience

22. Paul Chambers, 'Sacred Landscapes, Redundant Chapels and Carpet Warehouses: The Religious Heritage of South West Wales', in Elisabeth Arweck and William Keenan (eds.), *Materialising Religion: Expression, Performance and Ritual* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 21-31 (30). In the context of this study it is helpful to reflect on the ongoing cost that the unsold and redundant Methodist Chapel in Alston plays in the visibility and perception of the Methodist community there.

23. Chambers, 'Sacred Landscapes', p. 31.

and belief. As Morgan has argued: 'The transcendent does not come ... as pure light of sublime sensations in most cases, but in the odour or musty shrines or moulding robes or the pantry where they pray.'<sup>24</sup> It is necessary therefore, Morgan argues, when understanding religious experience to look beyond theological arguments or creedal utterances, and see religious experience as an embodied feature of lived religion. In light of contemporary debates on church buildings Morgan's insights could be read as further evidence of the need for us to 'grow-up' spiritually and to cast off our reliance on Gaze's 'transitional objects'; be they mouldy robes or the buildings themselves. However, what the sociological insights of material religion show us is that these things, far from being the props of an immature faith, are foundational to the formation and development of religious experience.

The anxiety of the contemporary church about their buildings is a symptom of a church which has lost sight of the deep value of the materiality of those buildings themselves. This was not always the case. Whyte reminds us that this was a fact that previous generations knew well. For Victorian church builders every part of the church building was intended to be a sign of a deep abiding truth. It is easy to lose sight of how dramatic a change this has been. As Whyte goes on to argue, it was the beliefs that underpinned this interest in the materiality of Victorian churches that fuelled the prolonged controversies over church buildings in the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Even in the latter half of the twentieth century a banner placed on St Nicholas' Church in Durham proclaiming, 'it is people that matter not buildings' acted as a provocative statement of contrast to the symbolic power of Durham's Norman Cathedral.<sup>26</sup> Whatever the roots of the commonplace and unchallenged claim that 'the Church isn't really the building, it's the people', the insights of material religion should wake us up to the deep missional cost of these statements. When we commonly speak of 'the church' we do not speak of a gathered understanding of a 'people of God' ecclesiology; we are speaking of the building. Despite all the developments in ecclesiology in the twentieth century it is worth noting that a dictionary definition of the word 'church' begins with two definitions relating to the building and only then speaking of church as 'the body of all Christians'.<sup>27</sup> We need not forget that the symbolic presence of our church buildings plays a much

24. David Morgan (ed.), *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 8.

25. Whyte, 'The Ethics of the Empty Church', p. 179.

26. David Brown, *Enchantment*, p. 256.

27. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 235.

greater role in the visible communication of the presence of God and the Church to the world around it than many in the Church would care to admit; as John Inge argues, 'buildings do symbolize in a very powerful fashion the faith that they represent, whether we like it or not'.<sup>28</sup>

There is a danger, as the 'Report of the Church Buildings Review Group' articulates, that this can tip into an idolatrous 'high view' which suggests that God prefers some parts of creation over others.<sup>29</sup> However, we need to take seriously how the broad swathe of the population relate to and experience the Church first and foremost through the symbolic role played by our inheritance of buildings. If our unalterable starting point is the utility and functionality of our buildings then we are in danger of losing the great gift God presents to the Church in the symbolic eloquence of our buildings in communicating to the world the ongoing presence of God's transforming grace in our communities.

In publications on rural life it is common to find them open with an image of the church building nestling at the heart of the community. This imagery of church buildings can be in danger of lending themselves only to nostalgia.<sup>30</sup> There is also a danger that an endorsement of it perpetuates the 'high view' of church buildings outlined above. However, these images speak of the symbolic role the buildings play in fostering and perpetuating an image of rural England. Current research on the role of faith in the creation of social capital recognizes the symbolic and not simply the functional importance of church buildings to communities. Writing from a secular standpoint, a survey by the Rowntree Foundation states that: '[faith] buildings, as well as being a resource for the neighbourhood, give the Faith community a visibility and a platform for wider engagement'.<sup>31</sup> Whilst there are issues concerned with the place of faith buildings in the development of social

28. John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2003), p. 117.

29. 'Report of the Church Buildings Review Group', p. 18.

30. Brown, *Enchantment*, p. 124. Whyte helpfully points out that the instinctive relationship of the English to the image of the Parish Church relates to their role in the established nature of the Church of England. Drawing on Wesley Carr's distinction between 'High' and 'Earthed' establishment, Whyte reminds us of the role that the Parish Church building plays in the 'Earthed Establishment' which assumes the role that the Parish Church plays in providing pastoral oversight for a geographical community which complements the 'High Establishment' of the Church's place in the constitutional settlement of the nation. See Whyte, 'The Ethics of the Empty Church' p. 174 and Wesley Carr, 'Developing Establishment', in *Theology*, 102 (1999), pp. 2-10.

31. Robert Furbey, Adam Dinham, Richard Farnell, Doreen Finneron and Guy Wilkinson, et al., *Faith as Social Capital: Connecting or Dividing?* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2006), p. 24.

capital, it is important to note the symbolic importance of buildings, above and beyond their specific utility or function, in their contexts.

To counter the threat of a 'high-view' of church buildings some have suggested that we find a middle ground between the symbolic and the functional. So, for instance, John Inge suggests that all churches can function as places of journey, encounter and pilgrimage. So he asks:

Should not all churches be places wherein there is a history of divine self-communication, of 'sacramental encounters' with the worshipping community that inhabits them? Should not their presence in the midst of that community nourish the faith of that community? Should they not proclaim to the secular world in which they stand that God is present and active in this world? Cannot each journey made to such a church be thought of as a 'mini-pilgrimage'? In short, should not every church be understood as a shrine?<sup>32</sup>

In these questions, we are challenged to rediscover our church buildings not just as places of encounter for our worshipping communities, not simply as places of pilgrimage, but also as symbolic utterances of God's ongoing work in that place; 'as a sign to them and to all people that God is not to be forgotten'.<sup>33</sup>

In the main this focus on church buildings as places of pilgrimage has found fruit in the connection of our buildings to their historic roots, to the stories of faith and life that they speak of, and to which we are invited to join. In the Dioceses of Durham and Newcastle this has been pursued in the 'Spirit in Stone' project which links churches of all sizes in the north-east of England to the history of pilgrimage and Christian worship in the north-east since the fifth century.<sup>34</sup> Projects like this can also be linked to the work of our great Cathedrals, such as Michael Sadgrove's guidebook to Durham Cathedral which encourages visitors to reconnect to the story of pilgrimage that lies at the heart of this great building.<sup>35</sup> Sheldrake argues that even the simplest of churches – with its natural architecture of journey from west to east, from the font to the altar, drawing the believers' eyes towards the dawn and the coming of the light of the world – can be places of pilgrimage.<sup>36</sup> So, for instance, it is possible for the untutored eye to see in the grand scale of Durham Cathedral or Hexham Abbey the history of pilgrimage and Christian

32. Inge, *Place*, p. 115.

33. Inge, *Place*, p. 114.

34. [www.spiritinstone.info](http://www.spiritinstone.info) (accessed 3 November 2016).

35. Michael Sadgrove, *Durham Cathedral: The Shrine of St Cuthbert* (Norwich: Jarrold Publishing, 2009).

36. Sheldrake, *Spaces*, p. 51.

witness in those places. Similarly, this is also possible in small churches of obvious historical importance, such as the small church of St Oswald built on the site where Bede tells us Oswald raised his wooden cross before the battle of Heavenfield in 635 CE.<sup>37</sup> However, in the Church of England these churches are the exception and not the rule. Many church buildings are places of soaring beauty and historical and spiritual importance, but many are not. Many are simple buildings which speak humbly of the simple fact of God's work and presence in that place. This is the case in the Parish of Alston Moor. Although, as already stated, many of the buildings have a great heritage, it is not immediately obvious how one could define any of the Churches as places of pilgrimage. Whilst pilgrimage is a deeply valued form of religious experience it is not the only one. Before we endorse the power of buildings as a place of pilgrimage we need to celebrate them first as places and signs of divine encounter.

There is a danger that those of us engaged in the life of the Church predetermine the form of religious experience, such as 'pilgrimage', available to those who encounter God in our buildings. Speaking from his own experience as an Anglican cleric David Brown makes this point bluntly when, speaking of church buildings he states we must recognize:

the capacity [of the building] in its own right to convey something of the enchantment that consists in basking in the presence of God without further end in view. Of course as a Christian and a priest I believe much is lost by those who fail to participate fully in the Church's liturgy. But I do want to protest against the implication so often drawn that this means that architecture must always be assessed in terms of a subordinate, serving role.<sup>38</sup>

By their very presence, and nothing else, our buildings are visible signs of God's presence throughout that remote corner of England. St Augustine's in Alston, although requiring work on the structure and fabric, is visible by its spire through the town and surrounding countryside. The 'Alston Aspire' project shows the important role the building plays as a focus for creative and community identity in Alston.<sup>39</sup> At the southern tip of the parish St Mary and St Patrick in Lambley sits high above the river South Tyne, visible to walkers and drivers, showing the ongoing presence of God's work in a place where few regularly use the building itself. Similarly, the account of Kirkaugh

37. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 144.

38. Brown, *Enchantment*, pp. 245-46.

39. [www.alstonaspire.org](http://www.alstonaspire.org) (accessed 3 November 2016).

Holy Paraclete, quoted above, could not deny the ancient and ongoing presence of God's work expressed through the fact of the building. In all these cases it is the simple fact of the building – rather than their potential or implicit functionality – which reveals to us God's presence, concern, and transforming grace in these places.

*'A Serious House on Serious Earth' – Buildings as Sacramental Symbols*

David Brown, in his book *God and Enchantment of Place*, argues powerfully for the deep sacramental and revelatory power of creation. Brown argues that when we understand the sacramental action of God in creation, we need to move beyond a focus on specific sacraments, and move to an understanding of the underlying rationale of what we understand as God's sacramental communication with his creation. Instead of beginning with an understanding of the sacraments through their traditional expressions – Baptism and the Eucharist – or the more general understanding of sacraments as 'outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace' – Brown encourages us to identify first the sacramental power of Christ's work in and through the creative order; the transcendence and immanence of God's grace revealed to us through 'the world as God's "second book"'.<sup>40</sup> If we are able to do this, Brown argues, we are able to refind much we have lost by linking human experience to the divine life through the actions of Christ as the 'primordial' or 'fundamental sacrament' of the created order.<sup>41</sup> This theological framework allows Brown to examine the wide and varied forms of divine revelation in creation which are common to human experience but routinely ignored in theological enquiry. Through this framework Brown goes on to explore the experience of divine revelation in areas of human experience as varied as Romantic landscape painting, mediaeval architecture, feng-shui, and American sports movies. Given the breadth of Brown's theological vision, I would argue that it is not too much of a leap to develop from Brown's natural theology a framework through which we are able to recognize the deep sacramental power of our buildings as they are.

Brown argues that the Church began to lose sight of the deep value of the sacramental through the Reformation's rejection of a perceived magical understanding of sacrament. For Brown reformed sacramental theology became part of a movement away from enchantment and mystery, and instead became, in Luther's case, a private mystery or

40. Brown, *Enchantment*, p. 33.

41. Brown, *Enchantment*, p. 28.

worse, as in Calvin's case, pure instrumentality.<sup>42</sup> This movement is characteristic, Brown argues, of the Church's withdrawal from serious theological engagement with large areas of human experience, be they food or music, gardening or architecture. It is possible to draw a line between the deep and prolonged retreat and inward turn which Brown describes and the functional way with which church buildings are viewed and understood in the contemporary Church. Church buildings are not simply buildings in which the functions of the church take place, they are places of religious and transcendent encounter and experience in their own right.<sup>43</sup> They are, as the Latin inscription above the main door of some churches reads, *Haec est porta Caeli* – 'the gate of heaven'.<sup>44</sup>

These words guide us to the story of Jacob's Ladder in Genesis 28 which provides us with a fitting way of recognizing buildings as sacramental symbols; as transcendent signs of God's presence and immanent places of divine encounter. The story of Jacob's encounter with God at Bethel stands as a watershed not only in the life of Jacob, but also in the story of God's dealing with his chosen people. Jacob, at the beginning of this story, has fled from his duplicity and Esau's wrath having cheated his brother out of his inheritance. For the first time in his story we encounter Jacob alone. In this place of solitude and vulnerability God reveals to Jacob, in his dream of the ladder linking heaven and earth, that the promise God made to Jacob's father and grandfather would continue through him. So profound is this experience of God's presence that Jacob utters those words of commitment which were as true then as they are now: 'the LORD is in this place – I did not know it'. This then leads Jacob to speak those deep and profound words: 'how awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven' (Gen. 28.16-17). More than this profound utterance Jacob marks this confirmation of God's covenant with his people by marking this place with the stone on which he laid his head. Setting the stone up as a pillar, and anointing it with oil, marking with simple and symbolic power this place where God's transcendent presence in creation was known and immanently experienced by Jacob. This physical symbol of Jacob's encounter with God provided the reminder of this profound change in his life, his commitment to God's plan and to live the way God had ordained him to live.

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, 'If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to

42. Brown, 'Re-conceiving the Sacramental', p. 23.

43. Brown, 'Re-conceiving the Sacramental', pp. 21-23.

44. Inge, *Place*, p. 119.



wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house.' (Gen. 28.20-22)

The pillar at Bethel provides the archetype for our understanding of church buildings as sacramental symbols. Drawing from Heidegger, Brown points out that humanity has always sought to measure itself against the transcendent power of the sky, and through this articulate the most basic of religious experiences.<sup>45</sup> This is the reason why natural objects like trees and mountains, as well as the simplest human structures such as standing stones, have always carried religious significance; as Brown states, 'the thrusting heavenward of a tree or rock suggesting an interchange, a highway between heaven and earth'.<sup>46</sup> This primordial logic is at the heart of the story of Jacob's actions at Bethel. Through it Jacob is reiterating the deep power of his dream, making symbolic and concrete his experience and knowledge of God's ongoing presence, promise and activity in creation. Those objects marked out for God, as Jacob's stone was when he anointed it with oil, act as constant reminders to a forgetful world that 'the LORD is in this place', even if we do not know it ourselves. Commentators have acknowledged that Jacob's act of setting up the stone could be a remembrance of a pre-Abrahamic cultic practice. However, it would be wrong for us to see this as the report of a primitive religious experience which has no importance to us today. Rather, the challenge of the story of Jacob at Bethel is whether we can discover God's real presence. At the heart of this story is the truth, made concrete by Jacob's setting up of a stone, of the decisive presence of God in the world around us. That, at this very basic level we are able to move beyond the merely functional to acknowledge the unmistakable simple physical fact of Jacob's stone; that for all who have eyes to see, God was, and is, and will always be at work in that place.

Turning from this famous story to our reflection on the church's inheritance of buildings there remains a dilemma that, even with reference to Jacob's actions at Bethel, a focus on physical structures limits us to a static and nostalgic understanding of God's presence and activity in creation. After all, in the Christian tradition the full development of Jacob's witness comes at the end of the first chapter of John's Gospel. There Nathanael encounters Jesus walking towards him through the crowds and declares Jesus to be 'the Son of Man! ... the King of Israel!' In response to this Jesus confirms Nathanael's insight

45. Brown, *Enchantment*, p. 24.

46. Brown, *Enchantment*, p. 248.

through a development of Jacob's words at Bethel: 'very truly I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the son of man' (Jn 1.49-51). This adoption of Jacob's witness in Jesus' own teaching could seem to give credence to modern ecclesiologies which, as we have seen, locate the identity of the Church not in the static and cultic constructions of Jacob, but in the dynamic movement of the body of Christ through creation. This tension draws us to an underlying dilemma in Brown's theology, as described by Trevor Hart, that Brown relies too much on the ballast of a sacramental vision to the cost of a more dynamic understanding of incarnational presence.<sup>47</sup> In responding to Hart's critique Brown argues that incarnation and sacrament are not ontologically and chronologically ordered, as Hart suggests, but are mutually interpreting terms. Brown's preference for the sacramental is therefore not a claim to lexical priority of one over the other, rather it is because sacramental language allows for a deeper engagement with other religious traditions whilst allowing us to speak more clearly of the reality of the form of religious experience Brown's work is seeking to rediscover.<sup>48</sup>

David Brown's nuanced understanding of the interplay between sacrament and incarnation encourages us to move beyond a simple either/or interpretation of the Church as either the building or the people. Recognising the central focus of the New Testament on people and Christ's presence in their midst, he takes seriously the way in which sacred space, buildings and their architectural form, were developed by the early Church not as a retrograde step, but as a means to develop this ongoing experience of Christ's presence in and through his creation. So Brown argues:

architecture then naturally fits into that frame as one such means with the form the building takes enabling God's presence with others, potentially at least, to be made manifest to them. It is surely therefore, no accident that Christians eventually came to declare of the buildings in which they worshipped that they were 'heaven and earth.'<sup>49</sup>

As with the interpretation of the neo-cultic acts of Jacob at Bethel, we miss something if we interpret and understand our buildings merely as nostalgic and retrograde objects. Rather our buildings present us with a

47. Trevor Hart, 'Lectio Divina?', in MacSwain and Worley (eds.), *Theology, Aesthetics and Culture*, pp. 226-40 (239).

48. David Brown, 'Experience, Symbol, and Revelation: Continuing the Conversation', in MacSwain and Worley (eds.), *Theology, Aesthetics and Culture*, pp. 265-304 (274).

49. Brown, *Enchantment*, p. 260.

powerful means of articulating to a forgetful world the deep sacramentality of creation, and through that the deep and ongoing presence of God's salvific work decisively present to all who seek to encounter it.

Rowan Williams, writing of Canterbury Cathedral, made this link between the power of our buildings and God's communication of the deep sacramentality of all creation through them:

Canterbury Cathedral is a huge, unmistakable physical fact: it simply stands there, quietly letting us know how deeply these issues mattered to people not so unlike us ... like Canterbury Cathedral, the life of Jesus stands there, an unmistakable physical fact in the world's history, letting us know that God makes room for us to grow and flourish in his company.<sup>50</sup>

Although few of our church buildings carry the dramatic power of Canterbury Cathedral, every church building – no matter how impressive or modest, how historically significant or simple – is, like Jacob's stone at Bethel, a symbol of God's commitment to and work within creation. Through their very form all our church buildings have the potential and power to be a 'serious house on serious earth'; showing simply through their presence, more eloquently than words, God's commitment to and ongoing work transforming creation.

### *Conclusion*

The purpose of this essay has not been to present a paean from a country parson for our inheritance of country churches; neither has it been my intention to dismiss the immediate pressure that many of us who worship in and serve church communities in rural England feel in seeking to update or simply maintain our church buildings. My intention has been to take seriously the ongoing power these church buildings have to articulate, just by the simplicity of their presence, the ongoing power and experience of faith. This ongoing power lies at the heart of Philip Larkin's poem with which I began this reflection, and from which the main title is drawn. Larkin, who was no fan of Christianity or the Church, writing over fifty years ago, sees in this wayside church a simple fact, something unshakable, unmoveable and unchangeable: 'Since someone will forever be surprising/ A hunger in himself to be more serious,/ And gravitating with it to this ground.'<sup>51</sup> There is an unmistakable power in church buildings, particularly in

50. <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2742/archbishop-in-radio-times-loves-fresh-start> (accessed 3 November 2016).

51. Larkin, 'Church Going', p. 59.

rural communities, to provide an affection, attraction and location for experiences of faith which, once lost, are almost impossible to recreate. In many of our rural areas, where the dominant hermeneutic has been of decline and retreat from public agencies, private business, and other denominations, for the Church of England the simple fact of our buildings presents a powerful statement of purpose and commitment of God and the Church to the communities in which they stand.

This point underlines the argument of this essay that the Church needs to take seriously the basic fact of its inheritance of buildings. In this sense the fact of this inheritance presents two options. On one hand, this inheritance can be viewed as a burden on the life of the Church causing the Church to be 'crushed' by these 'monuments in stone'. On the other hand, it is possible to see these buildings, all buildings, as powerful and lasting sacramental symbols of the fact of God's concern with, and mission, in the world. By developing an understanding of these buildings, not as monuments in stone, but as dynamic sacramental symbols of God's presence they cease to become functional preaching houses or prayer rooms, and become instead articulations of God's work through the very ground of his creation. Like Jacob's stone at Bethel, the very stones that we have used to build these sacramental symbols – stones that were hewn from quarries centuries ago, stones which on Alston Moor were used before for Roman walls or forts, Saxon Churches or homes – stand as ongoing articulations that 'God is in this place'. These stones by their simple presence are able to articulate, to shout out, God's deep, decisive and transforming concern for all creation.

By starting with our buildings as sacramental symbols we are able to reframe the question of what we do with our inheritance of buildings away from the dominant functional understanding in contemporary discussions about church buildings. The church's inheritance of buildings is part of what God gives each generation to continue the work of mission and witness in the world. Church buildings stand as serious and lasting expressions of God's commitment to God's serious earth. Accepting this fact does not necessarily make buildings the unalterable starting point of our mission, but they should be recognized as the unmistakable starting point of the life and witness of the Church, as they have been, and can continue to be for generations.