



Sir John Mordaunt and his wife Edith at All Saints, Turvey, in the Deanery of Sharnbrook

Life is hard for the loveliest of village churches

SIR – Many of our village churches (Catherine Pepinster, Comment, August 23) can no longer offer Evensong and, even at festivals, cannot provide a choir. Some are reduced to relying on pre-recorded music to accompany their worship.

But they carry on faithfully, making the best of what they have, because our churches are more than museums and a place to remember the dead, or even experience the occasional “twitch upon the thread”.

All churches are living witnesses to the Christian faith handed down through the ages, and, particularly in rural areas, a focal point in every village reminding us of the presence of Christ in our midst.

In our deanery we have 30 Grade I listed buildings, some mentioned in Simon Jenkins’s *England’s Thousand Best Churches*. Each costs thousands of pounds to maintain, insure and repair, in addition to the cost of contributing to a priest’s stipend and the Parish Share contributed to the diocese.

Beleaguered churchwardens and the remaining few PCC members have to decide how to prioritise their slender resources. Should they make their church safe and waterproof or support their priest (or, if without a priest, pay for retired priests to take services)? Despite this, our small churches still faithfully give to various charities.

We welcome those who “believe without belonging” and are glad to see occasional visitors, but it rarely does much to help the cash-flow. We are enormously grateful to groups who often “belong without believing” yet make great efforts to raise funds to maintain the building.

A few of our village churches have had pews removed, and others are keen to do so, to create a flexible space for parishioners to enjoy what was originally intended to be a community building. This is not to raise funds – indeed change will only add to financial burdens – but to extend ministry to those outside the church and to be a blessing to the local community.

With the advice of a good architect changes can be planned in sympathy with the building, and can enhance its appearance as pillars and stonework are revealed.

Several of our churches have seen people of all ages feeling at home in church as they come along with their families to Messy Church, or to a weekly community café, or home-cooked lunches and occasional craft workshops. They meet friends, share concerns, care for one another and, yes, find a quiet place in the chancel to sit and pray.

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