



ENGLISH HERITAGE

Home / About Us / News

A Glimpse of Heaven

A Glimpse of Heaven, a new landmark publication celebrating the beauty and history of more than 100 of the finest Roman Catholic churches and cathedrals in England and Wales, is published today (Thursday 30 November) by English Heritage in collaboration with the Patrimony Committee of the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.



Simon Thurley, the Chief Executive of English Heritage, with the Bishop of Brentwood at the launch of *A Glimpse of Heaven*

The book is the first ever of its kind and is aimed at a broad non-specialist audience. It argues that Catholic buildings in England and Wales have been undervalued and overlooked despite major achievement in terms of design and originality and their obvious contribution to British architecture.

Speaking at the launch of ***A Glimpse of Heaven*** at St Peter's Italian church in Clerkenwell, London, Simon Thurley, Chief Executive of English Heritage, said: "I am delighted to be publishing this book about our finest Catholic buildings. It is high time their treasures were recognised by the academic community and brought to a wider audience. As a group, they have been largely overlooked by architectural historians who have sometimes drawn unfair and inappropriate comparisons with Anglican places of worship. What this book illustrates is that Catholic buildings have a quite separate history and development of their own."

In his foreword to the book, His Eminence Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor writes: "I have always been susceptible to the beauty of art and architecture. I believe that good architecture can be a bridge to religious experience. However, I do not consider myself an architectural expert which is why this book, intended for the non specialist reader, is such a revelation. The Catholic heritage in this country is in many ways a hidden heritage, under-sung and under-appreciated...this book is a testimony to the renewed interest and sense of pride in its heritage which the Catholic community has developed in recent years."

BOOK SYNOPSIS

Each chapter of *A Glimpse of Heaven* is devoted to a milestone in the history of the Catholic Church since the Reformation when Catholic worship and the building of Catholic churches became illegal for two hundred years. The Catholic Relief Act of 1791 unleashed a surge of devotion and a huge and diverse programme of church building – a drive that was given urgent impetus by the need to serve those who had remained true to the Faith, the many who converted to Rome and the thousands of Irish Catholics who poured into England's cities during the 19th century.

The resulting churches varied in scale and ambition. Some were simple chapels which provided little more than adequate accommodation for Mass. Others were magnificent. There were dazzling chapels built by Catholic aristocrats (such as those at Waddour Castle in Wiltshire and Everingham in Yorkshire), masterpieces of sumptuous Gothic invention designed by such masters as A W N Pugin (St. Mary's, Derby, St. Giles, Cheadle and Birmingham Cathedral), huge "landmark" churches designed to demonstrate the power and authority of Rome and the returned church (The Holy Name, Manchester and St Walburge, Preston) and Classical basilicas to rival those in Rome itself (the Oratory churches in Birmingham and in London). There are Arts and Crafts style churches (St Clare, Sefton Park, Liverpool) and no Christian denomination embraced with more enthusiasm the technology, materials and ideas promoted by architecture's



St Peter's Italian church in Clerkenwell, London was built in the early 1860s to serve the area's large and impoverished Italian community. It represented a break from the prevailing Gothic style of the time. The plan to build the church was supported by Pope Pius IX. It was a very large church (to seat more than 3,000) and was based on the basilica of Santa Maria Trastevere in Rome and dedicated to St Peter. The size of the scheme and the particular dedication raised some Protestant eyebrows in Parliament. The interior of the church is still dramatic and glows with paintings, frescoes and statuary – its broad nave and aisles are flanked by marbled columns and its altar crowned with a baldacchino supported by pillars of black and gold topped with gilded angels. St Peter's still has a thriving, and mostly Italian, congregation today and is very much at the heart of its community.

But as well as being a celebration of the rich and varied legacy of Catholic cathedrals, churches and chapels, the book also serves as a reminder that in some cases these buildings may face an uncertain future. In his introduction, author Christopher Martin warns that England's Roman Catholic heritage is fragile not just because of the vast cost of maintaining such buildings. Declining congregations in many parts of the country, fewer priestly vocations and demographic change mean some churches will have to close. Others will need substantial funds if they are to remain open.



Intricate carving and murals inside the St Charles Borromeo Church in Hull, East Yorkshire

To tackle this problem before it escalates, English Heritage, in partnership with the Roman Catholic Church, is promoting strategic reviews of historic churches, starting with the RC dioceses of Portsmouth, Leeds, Middlesbrough and Liverpool.

These studies, called *Taking Stock*, are being part-funded by English Heritage and will help provide badly needed advice and information to those tasked with planning for the future. *Taking Stock* builds on two similar reports on the churches in the Roman Catholic dioceses of Lancaster and Arundel & Brighton commissioned by English Heritage last year.

Simon Thurley continued: "There is also a call to action in *A Glimpse of Heaven* – it warns that in some places our Catholic heritage is hanging by a thread and that we must act to protect it. In May this year English Heritage launched ***Inspired!*** - a campaign to secure a future for England's 14,500 historic places of worship. Part of that campaign strategy is to be proactive and the *Taking Stock* surveys are a perfect example of this approach. I would like to thank those Roman Catholic dioceses involved in the surveys for offering to take part despite the many competing demands on their time and resources."

One example of a church in need of support is St Walburge, Preston in Lancashire. It was built in the 1850s, a huge, dark sandstone building with the tallest church spire in England which pierced the smoke of this rapidly expanding industrial town. St Walburge was a product of the great Catholic revival. Its grandiose Gothic interior by J A Hansom brought light, colour and richness to the drabness and poverty of Victorian working class existence. It was churches such as this that strove to create a sacred space, "a glimpse of heaven" on a Sunday amid the dingy tenements and back to backs of dark Victorian cities. Shifts in population mean that St. Walburge's congregation today is a fraction of what it was and the area is deprived. Yet its colossal structure requires constant attention and is a drain on limited resources. The scale of the building and its repair needs cannot be borne by the parish or the diocese alone, but its architectural and historic importance make closure for worship unthinkable. Another inner city church requiring significant sums of money to be spent on its fabric is the little known but astonishing Baroque-style St. Charles Borromeo, Hull. A major appeal for help is soon to be launched by the diocese.



Interior view of the Our Lady of the Assumption Church, Warwick Street, London

On the other hand there are success stories, Gerard Goalen's historically important Modernist church at Harlow New Town developed alarming faults and had to be closed. After years of fundraising and months of repair work it is open once again. Another success story is St. Francis Xavier in Hereford's main street, an early C19th masterpiece in the Greek revival style which was closed because it was thought beyond repair with rampant dry rot. A few years ago, following a local campaign and grant aid from English Heritage, this church has been reopened.

The shift to an understanding and appreciation of Catholic churches has been slow - not just by the public but by professionals and experts. It has meant that Catholic churches are under-listed. Of more than 3,000 buildings only 18% are "listed" and so eligible for public funding for restoration work and VAT relief on repairs. .

A Glimpse of Heaven is not just about the architecture of Catholic churches. It tells a story of their times – the politics, controversies, the drama. The book argues that more attention must be paid to these churches and that their future is not only a matter for the Catholic Church or for English Heritage but to everyone with an interest in our architectural heritage.