Dwindling congregations cast pall over city churches

Years of neglect have left Birmingham’s churches crumbling faster than anywhere else in the country, a report has revealed.

A survey of the city’s holy buildings has revealed that 28 per cent are at risk of falling into serious disrepair – compared with an average of nine per cent in other cities.

English Heritage said dwindling congregations were the main reason that church leaders had struggled to raise funds to meet spiralling repair bills.

The conservation body has issued guidelines to worshippers to help teach them how to preserve the buildings for generations to come.

“Churches are all that some communities have left now that post offices and pubs have closed,” said Tim Johnston, English Heritage’s director for the West Midlands.

“There’s help out there but there’s also a lot that congregations can be doing to help preserve churches. We have found some buildings with serious damage to stonework just because gutters weren’t cleaned so we will be advocating the old adage about a stitch in time,” he said.

“It’s difficult to put a finger on why Birmingham has so many churches in the risk bracket. Dwindling attendance is one factor but it seems possible that other strands of Christianity have become more prevalent than those worshipped in the more traditional church buildings.”

Those in Birmingham which have been identified as “at risk” include St Edberhna’s in Yardley – the city’s second oldest church, dating back more than 800 years.

Church leaders have had to stop ringing bells for fear the Grade I-listed spire could collapse and hope to start remedial work next year.

Parishioners at Assemblies of the First Born on Loxells Road in Loxells also hope to move back in next year after eight years in temporary accommodation.

Mortuary Chapel at Handsworth Cemetery is still being used for services but is deemed at risk while its state is assessed.

St Barnabas Church in Erdington High Street is also on the list after being gutted by fire in 2007. A planning application has been approved to create a modern structure alongside the remains of the 19th century church.

Singers Hill Synagogue on Bicher Street in Birmingham city centre has been given an award by English Heritage for conservation after worshippers raised thousands of pounds. The neo-classical hall, dating from 1856, has been developed as a centre for all faiths.

Others singled out for praise by English Heritage chiefs include the Church of St Leonard, Yardpole, in Herefordshire, which is home to the village’s post office and a cafe.

Tapping in to the

Security expert Richard J Aldrich tells Richard McComb about the threats to privacy posed by Britain's electronic snoops.

Researching the history of GCHQ, Britain’s largest and arguably most secretive intelligence organisation, can be an unsettling experience.

Just ask security expert Richard J Aldrich, who has spent most of the past decade looking into the super-snoop agency, based at Cheltenham in a circular building known as The Doughnut.

Aldrich has just published GCHQ: an unauthorised history of the Government Communications Headquarters, a clandestine body both feared and revered for its code-breaking exploits and covert, often highly controversial, surveillance techniques.

GCHQ is the direct descendant of Cheltenham Park, whose pipe-smoking cypher boffins were celebrated for cracking Nazi Germany's wartime communications.

However, the same nostalgic glow has never bathed the activities of our modern-day Station X, due in part to its growing reputation for what Aldrich calls “retail surveillance.” As his book makes clear, we are all, in a sense, being watched; and Aldrich, professor of international security at the University of Warwick, is not naive enough to think that he may have slipped under the radar.

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Richard J Aldrich, left, looks at the changing role of GCHQ, based near Cheltenham, right.