

The Well-equipped Churchwarden

On taking office a churchwarden should make sure that he or she has a water-tight pair of wellies, a strong umbrella, a pair of binoculars, a thick overcoat, an oil can (not just for calming troubled waters), a set of church keys, a stout heart, a notebook and biro! With these he or she can tackle anything, especially spotting potential trouble almost before it starts.

The enemy

No, it's not the Vicar or the congregation but rising damp, blocked drains and gutters, poor ventilation, faulty wiring, insecure windows and doors, the unserviced boiler, the slipped slate and crumbling stonework. It may even be the burden of office and need to take time off and say your own prayers.

Water is probably the greatest single cause of damage to buildings. Second is poor ventilation, followed by faulty electrical wiring (which is the cause of most fires) and poor security which lets the thieves and vandals in.

A regular walk round the buildings in your care (at least once a month), occasionally in the rain to spot blocked drains and gutters, armed with binoculars to spot the slipped slate or the elder tree growing half-way up the tower can do wonders. Notice it, note it and get help to put it right!

A check list

The following check-list may help;

1 Drains and gutters - should be cleared, at least once a year, when leaves are down. Paying someone to do this may cost £100

or so if you cannot reach them yourself. Failure to keep them clear will certainly cause damage which will cost up to several thousand pounds to repair.

- 2 Weeds and green growth round the base of walls - removed or killed as needed. Take care not to damage fabric by removing ivy before it has died back.
- 3 Ventilation - good ventilation is important especially between use, to reduce internal condensation.
- 4 Slipped slates and damaged tiles - look out for them especially after storms and for internal telltale damp patches.
- 5 Insecure door and windows - an invitation to the thief!
- 6 Old, trailing or loose wiring - the cause of many fires.
- 7 Churchyard care - not just the grass, but noting dangerous or loose tombstones (a real hazard to children), broken glass that others haven't spotted, dead limbs on trees which may need surgery
- 8 The boiler - should be serviced annually and started up occasionally during the summer months to make sure it works when it is needed.
- 9 Churchyard walls and fences - a stitch in time can save large bills.
- 10 Valley gutters - out of sight, out of mind, but need clearing, especially of leaves and snow.

- 11 Fire extinguishers - need annual maintenance
- 12 The Log Book and Inventory - be ready for the New Year and the P.C.C.'s inspection.
- 13 Oil the locks - dry locks bend keys.
- 14 Spring-clean - an annual event in both buildings and churchyard can prevent the accumulation of clutter and debris
- 15 Clear tower roof and belfry - jackdaws and pigeons love bell towers - check screens for holes.
- 16 Beetles and dry rot - watch for tell-tale dust (woodworm), droppings (mice), droppings that look like mice droppings (Death-watch beetle) and growths on walls and woodwork (which may be dry rot).

Make sure you have help. Good churchwardens look for trouble but seek the help of others to help them out.

If in doubt, shout! Ring your archdeacon

Bedside reading

“The Churchwarden Year” - Church House Publishing 1989

“How to Look after your Church” and a whole series on individual items such as stonework, repairs, lighting, etc - Council for Care of Churches, available from S.P.C.K. Bookshops. A Cambridgeshire Handbook of Church Fabric 1994 pub The Cambridgeshire Historic Churches Trust

A Handbook for Churchwardens & Parochial Church Councillors 1996 ed. available from S.P.C.K.