

Change to Historic Churches

A Guide for the Perplexed

Nigel Walter

Welcome!
Start
Here

Changing a historic church can be a **long and winding journey**. This Guide provides a map for what may feel like an **epic quest**.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE:

Don't feel you need to read this Guide cover to cover! Rather, dip in and follow your interest... The following may help you navigate:

Red dashes link the major themes...

...with supporting material to each side

...and comments on post-it notes towards the edges

Further material from *Buildings for Mission* is signposted if needed: (see back cover).

BfM
A1

This Guide has seven sections:

1. Community

2. Identity

7. Last Words

1.

6. Action!

3. Tradition

5. Talking to Experts

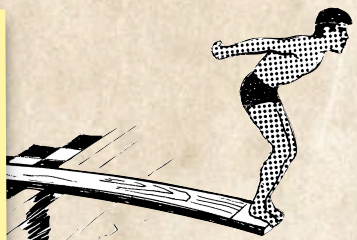
4. Telling your Story

(Leviathan)

Here Be Dragons!

1. Community

The aim of bringing together theology and heritage is to help church communities see their building less as a burden and more as a springboard to ministry.



'We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us'
Winston Churchill

Community Buildings

We are so used to seeing a building as an artefact, a possession (we speak of 'property'), a functional tool, or merely as the backdrop to human action.

BfM F1

What all of these ignore, but what Churchill hints at, is that buildings also help to make us who we are **as a community**.

This means that the relationship between communities and their buildings need not be cold and 'objective', but can be **warm and intimate!**

Churchill's insight is lost on many people, but it has **radical implications**.

Why Bother?
Changing a historic building is really hard work!

This Guide places historic church buildings in a wider cultural (& theological) context, helping you to propose better change, and then argue better for it.

So hard in fact that the navigation of the process itself is beyond the capacity of some church communities.

Perplexed?



The journey is a long and winding one, through what at times feels like a hostile landscape. Church communities require courage to set out on this **arduous journey**, but do so understanding that buildings foster community life.

Communal Stories
Church buildings have typically changed almost every generation. Change is part of their nature; they are **communal stories**.

'ICONS'
Historic buildings are 'iconic,' i.e., best understood as **Inter-generational, Communal, Ongoing Narratives**.

The rest of this Guide provides a map to navigate change to historic buildings, showing you where some of the pitfalls lie...



Some see a church solely as a **work of art**, but this does violence to its nature; instead of **change** being lifeblood it becomes seen as **harm**.

(BIG MISTAKE!)

A Key Player
A church building is not incidental to the life of a church community.

Inter-generational Communal Ongoing Narratives

Imagine an **unfinished novel** in eight chapters, and our task is to write the ninth; we need to fully understand the story to date, write a creative chapter in this generation, and leave plot lines open for those we know will follow.

Otherwise the story simply doesn't hang together...



There is lots of discussion in heritage about the relation of **communities** to historic buildings, and the balance of power between the expert and the public in deciding their future.

Fellow Travellers

Everyone wants more **public participation** in heritage, but without giving up any power to make decisions. Impossible!

Churches that can demonstrate thorough **community consultation** and support are more likely to succeed. And that fits very well with the uniquely Anglican remit to care for all the people of the parish, not just regular church-goers.

BfM D3

A perfect building does not produce a perfect church community, but a difficult building (or a great building badly handled) can squeeze the life out of a community.

BfM C5

Think of the building as your **dance partner**: if either of you drags your feet, you're likely to fall over.

2. Identity

Concentric Circles

An idea for change may start with an individual, or a small handful of people. But if ownership of that idea doesn't spread, then the project will fail.

Success depends on wider and wider rings of people embracing it. As it spreads it will, most likely, change, because each widening involves dialogue with others. To survive, an idea must therefore be **strong**, but it must also be **flexible**. This is as true of building walls as it is of building ideas.

Strength in Weakness

All walls move(!), responding to heat and cold, wetting and drying, etc. Walls built with cement mortar that is too strong will fail; they develop a few, large cracks, allowing big bits of building to fail.

There's lots of practical information available on traditional materials. For example:

- www.spab.org.uk/advice/technical-q-as/
- www.buildingconservation.com

And don't forget your church architect!

BfM B2

By contrast, a wall built with lime mortar is more resilient **because it is weaker**. The mortar has some elasticity, and is weaker than the brick; any movement is spread through all the joints.

'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in **weakness**.'
2 Corinthians 12:9

What's the Idea?
So What's the Idea??

So What's the Great Idea??

Compromise

When did 'compromise' become a dirty word?

If good ideas are born whole in the mind of an individual genius, then **compromise** will mean loss, a dumbing down, mediocrity.

But should we believe in individual genius? Isn't the Church more about community than individuality?

Where good ideas are born collaboratively, by stages, in community, then **compromise** can mean enrichment, becoming more than the sum of the parts...

Which feels more God-like?

Who Are We, Anyway?

The question of identity has searching implications for any Christian community.

Are you a community at all, or merely a bundle of individuals with minimal common commitments?

Do you understand your locality, or have you turned inwards and become a **private members' religious club**?



Remember the joke about the camel being a horse designed by committee?

Most likely you will need an **architect** as a travelling companion. At times you will need them to represent your best interests, so it is essential that they understand your culture, and the ecclesiastical exemption, and that you can trust them.

Help Wanted!

Check for conservation accreditation (AABC or RIBA), and ask your diocesan office for advice. Ask for references, and follow them up.

Do some **soul-searching** before you start. It is better to spend 5 years reconnecting with the people you are there to serve, than to progress a project that isn't rooted in real need.



3. Tradition

Tradition is like giving birth, not like wearing your father's hat. Pablo Picasso

Most historic churches are listed; we call them 'traditional' buildings, as opposed to 'modern' ones. But being listed – and traditional – doesn't mean they can't change. Instead, it means they *should* be able to change. Here's why...

Community Hubs

Many of our church buildings pre-date the Reformation, inviting us to engage with an earlier, richer understanding of what a church community and its buildings could be.

BfM C9

alive, not dead...

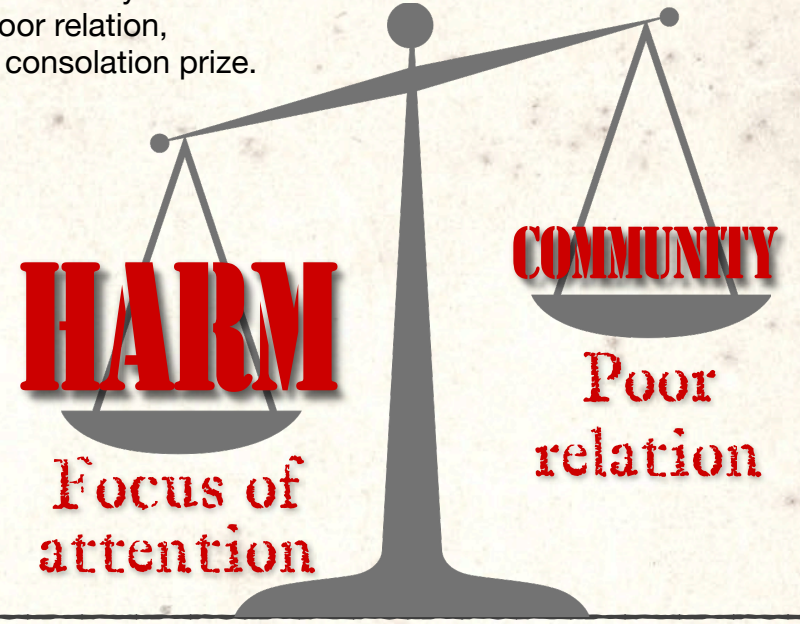
Tradition is only democracy extended through time... It is the **democracy** of the dead. G K Chesterton

For Picasso & Chesterton tradition is creative, because it is

Two Approaches To Heritage

How It Works

The current system firstly assesses 'harm' to significance (architecture and history only - 'old school') and then judges whether community benefit outweighs that 'harm'. Two things result: change is easily confused with harm, and community benefit becomes the poor relation, a consolation prize.



Old School

An 'old school' approach sees heritage primarily as historic and architectural: the 'crown jewels.'

New School

By contrast, many in heritage recognise the role of people and communities in what makes a building important; this is the 'new school' approach

Implicated!

Whether we like it or not, a historic church building is a player in this argument over the nature of tradition. Because our culture is desperate for heritage they present a huge **opportunity** for mission, a medium through which a church can (re)build relationships with the broader local community.

The current criteria for buildings being listed relates only to this 'old school' approach.

Historic England's current guidance adds communal significance into the mix; this causes argument, but at least puts community onto the map.

So where are all the people?

An 'old school' approach sees the meaning of a building independent of its community;

The 'new school' approach brings people onto the margins;

A 'tradition-centred' approach sees a building without people as wholly meaningless.

Naturally, different heritage bodies and individuals take different approaches; do not be surprised if the experts disagree. Section 5 introduces the key players...

A Third Way – Tradition-Centred Heritage

A narrative perspective considers 'impact' rather than 'harm' and sees the importance of a building as dynamic, as much related to people as to physical fabric. It recognises that change can **add to** as well as subtract from a building. Tradition is not about fixed things - the 'crown jewels' approach – it is **alive, creative and future-facing**.

BfM C6

To be **tradition-centred** means to be genuinely historical - that is, seeing history as an ongoing **continuity**, as much concerned with the present and future as the past.

An 'old school' approach that sees historic churches as fixed works of art, only as products of the past, is thus deeply **anti-historical**.



4. Telling your Story

'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.'
1 Peter 3:15

As your project progresses, the internal dialogue from which it started will widen. There are **two key documents** that frame that wider dialogue, and in large part determine the outcome...

Try this **useful tool** for writing an SoS: www.statementsofsignificance.org.uk

If from the outset you can demonstrate a command of the **history** then your views will be less easily dismissed by those who don't share them.
And it is part of being **responsible stewards** of an important historic resource to go out of your way to acquire that knowledge.

WARNING!
Beware attempting to minimise the importance of a part of the existing building simply because you envisage changing it - you will be found out!



Here Be Monsters!

BfM D2

Significance (Homework)

To change a historic building well you need to do your homework; this becomes your **Statement of Significance** ('SoS'). Good homework does not guarantee success, but a lack of it almost guarantees failure. Show that you care!

The **SoS** describes the story of the building to date, how it was **formed by** community.

A Tale Of Two Statements

Two households, both alike in dignity...

These are working documents that will go through **multiple iterations**

SoS & SoN work together, or not at all...

Needs (Direction)

BfM D6

As a living community, you will always be on a journey. Your **Statement of Needs** ('SoN') articulates your sense of direction, telling the narrative of the community to date, and sketching the outline of the next chapters in the story.

The **SoN** tells the story of the community **formed around** that building, and where that community is heading.

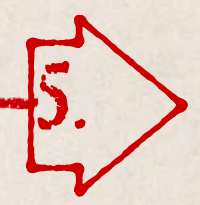
A different context, clearly, but not unrelated...

...and most church buildings are packed full of theology, ripe for exposition!

As experts in community (next page), you will be familiar with questions of **vocation** and **mission**. Include these in your statement; explain how your needs relate to your diocesan strategy.

This is **good conservation!** It is an argument for the continuing relevance of the building to the life of the community that owns and inhabits it.

Your aim is to build **consensus**, internally within the church and externally with your local community & the statutory consultees (up next).

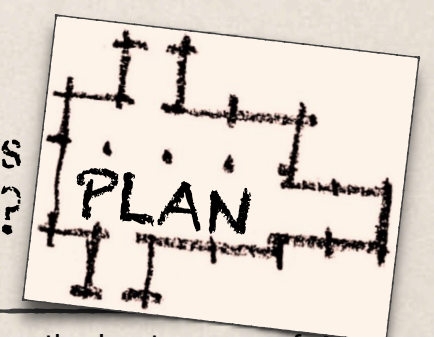


'Bind us together, Lord'

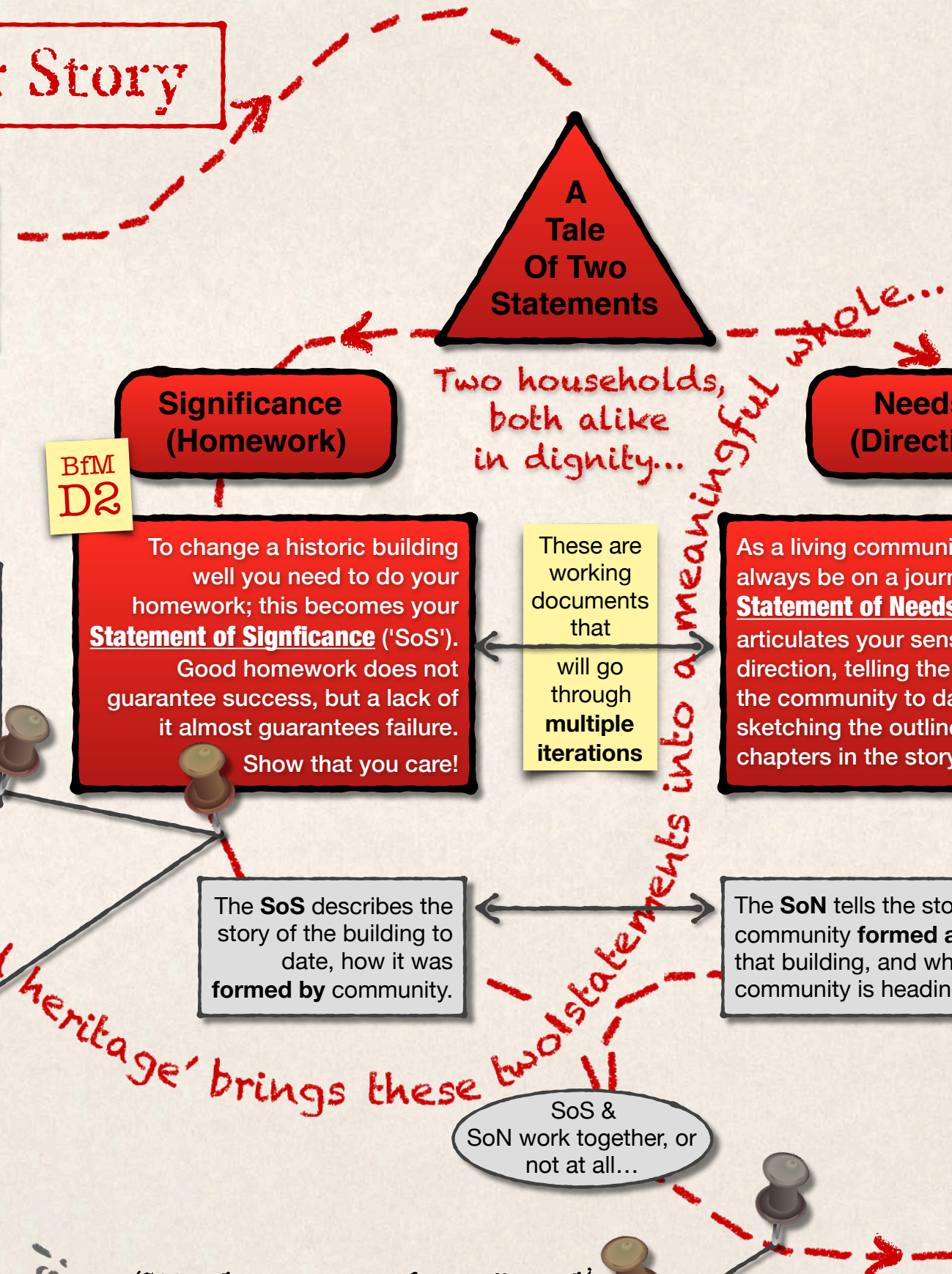
When writing your statements, try to bind **community** into significance, referencing Historic England's *Conservation Principles* - get your architect to help, if needed.

Even if some statutory consultees dismiss the argument it will frame the debate in a helpful way, firstly for the DAC's deliberations, and secondly for the chancellor.

So What's the Plan?



Good drawings are the best means of thinking through your proposals, but they're not an end in themselves; more important is the story they tell. Always be ready to explain how your proposals fit into the **wider narrative** of the community.



5. Talking to Experts

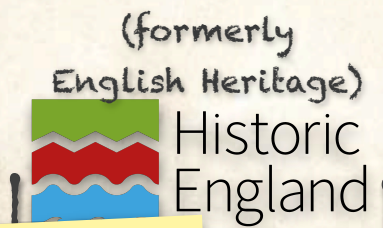
Your Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) is central to gaining your permission; it comprises clergy, architects and specialists in bells, clocks, furnishings etc. Your DAC Secretary can coach you through the process of applying for faculty.

Your First Port of Call

The DAC acts like a planning committee, recommending your scheme for approval (or not) to the diocesan chancellor, who decides. A well-chaired DAC will understand your mission and ministry priorities.

Build bridges - the DAC are your friends!
I ♥ DAC

Ask your DAC Secretary for advice on which of these bodies should be consulted, and when.



Council for British Archaeology



1700
THE GEORGIAN GROUP

1837
Vs THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY

1914
TWENTIETH CENTURY SOCIETY



The World and his Wife!

BfM D8
Under the faculty system, when changing historic buildings you must also consult a variety of **external stakeholders** - up to 8 in all...

So Who Else Has A Say?

Own Your Expertise
This multiplication of experts, resulting from the **professionalisation** of the care of historic buildings, means that church communities can easily feel **de-skilled**. Don't forget that you too are experts: you are, or should be, **EXPERTS IN COMMUNITY.**

Context is Everything

A working church knows its **locality**. You are the ones to champion the needs of your particular parish.

You also (should) uniquely understand how individuals come together to form community, what it means to be more than the sum of the parts - you are, after all, the **Body of Christ.**

Your expertise in community is **indispensable** to the health of the building.

Most of the other participants bring different forms of technical knowledge; valuable as this is, it is **meaningless** without the context of your local, cultural knowledge.

THE LAW

"GENERAL PRINCIPLE 1 Duty to have regard to church's purpose.
Any person or body carrying out functions of care and conservation under this Measure or under any other enactment or rule of law relating to churches shall have due regard to the role of a church as a **local centre of worship and mission.**"

(Worth learning by heart!)

Care of Churches & Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure 1991

The law relating to changing a listed church building is set out in the Care of Churches Measure 1991. Section 1 frames the whole process in terms of **mission and worship.**

Which means that anyone involved in the process who ignores questions of mission and worship is breaking the law!

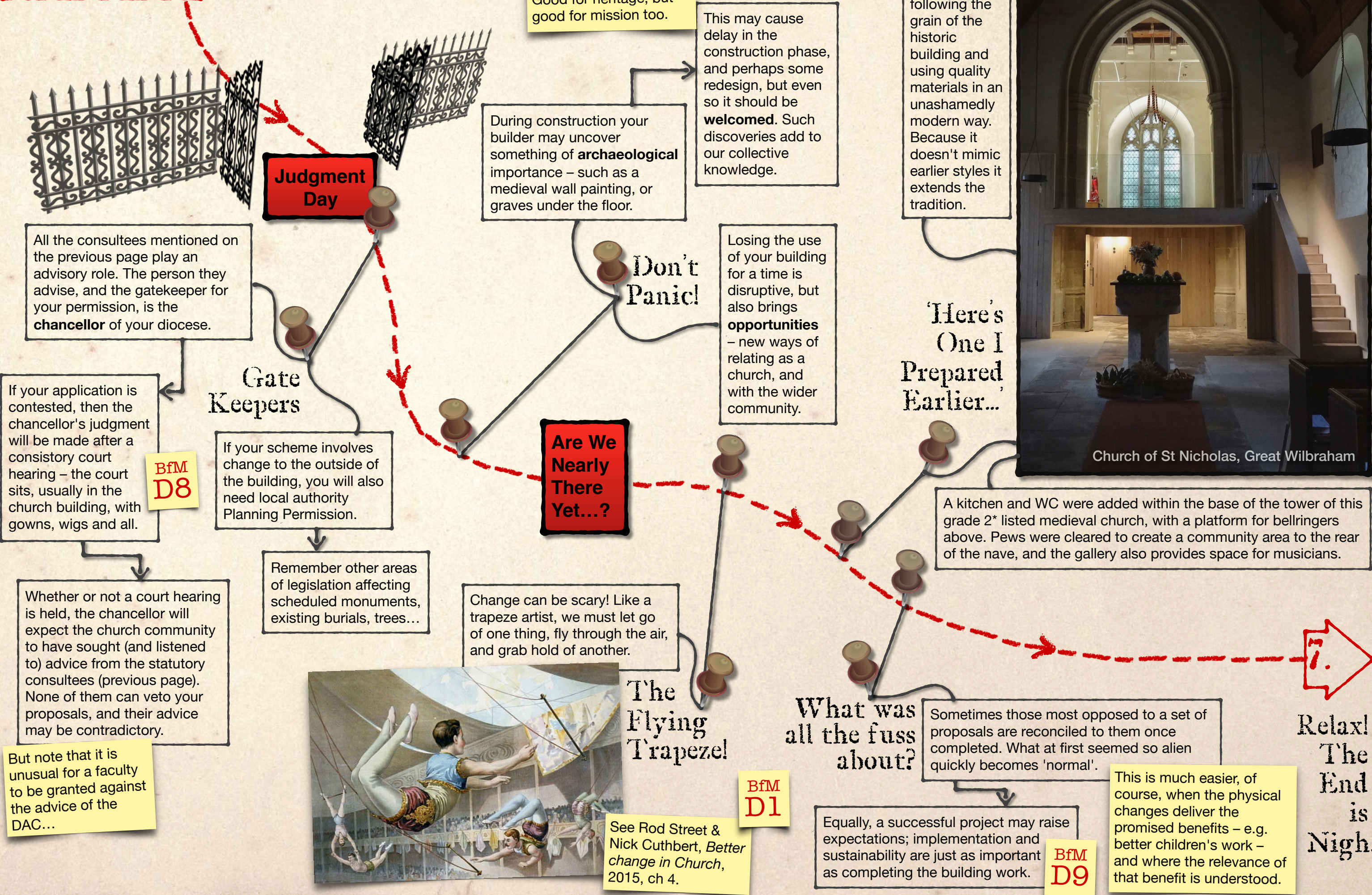
'Prophet & Loss

For those who do not understand tradition, change is too easily confused with loss. Part of the role of the Church is to be prophetic, that is, **to call for change.** Heritage is neither culturally nor theologically neutral.

Remember: It's not a building project, but a mission project that happens to involve a building...



6. Action!



All the consultees mentioned on the previous page play an advisory role. The person they advise, and the gatekeeper for your permission, is the **chancellor** of your diocese.

If your application is contested, then the chancellor's judgment will be made after a consistory court hearing – the court sits, usually in the church building, with gowns, wigs and all.

BfM D8

If your scheme involves change to the outside of the building, you will also need local authority Planning Permission.

Remember other areas of legislation affecting scheduled monuments, existing burials, trees...

Whether or not a court hearing is held, the chancellor will expect the church community to have sought (and listened to) advice from the statutory consultees (previous page). None of them can veto your proposals, and their advice may be contradictory.

But note that it is unusual for a faculty to be granted against the advice of the DAC...

Change can be scary! Like a trapeze artist, we must let go of one thing, fly through the air, and grab hold of another.



The Flying Trapeze!

See Rod Street & Nick Cuthbert, *Better change in Church*, 2015, ch 4.

BfM D1

What was all the fuss about?

Sometimes those most opposed to a set of proposals are reconciled to them once completed. What at first seemed so alien quickly becomes 'normal'.

Equally, a successful project may raise expectations; implementation and sustainability are just as important as completing the building work.

BfM D9

This is much easier, of course, when the physical changes deliver the promised benefits – e.g. better children's work – and where the relevance of that benefit is understood.



Church of St Nicholas, Great Wilbraham

'Here's One I Prepared Earlier...'

A kitchen and WC were added within the base of the tower of this grade 2* listed medieval church, with a platform for bellringers above. Pews were cleared to create a community area to the rear of the nave, and the gallery also provides space for musicians.

Relax! The End is Nigh...

7. Last Words

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. Matt. 5.17

Like it or not, historic buildings raise the much bigger, **mission-shaped** question of how the Church relates to the culture as a whole

- Options include...
- Withdrawal into a Christian sub-culture (**isolation**).
 - Making Church fit culture (**collusion**).
 - Accepting defeat and retreating into **managed decline**.

Positive cultural **engagement**.
Our choice is **engagement**. Dialogue is still possible!

'True tradition is always a **living** tradition. It changes while remaining always the same. It changes because it faces different situations, not because its essential content is modified. This content is not an abstract proposition; it is the **living Christ** Himself, who said, 'I am the Truth.'
John Meyendorff, *Living Tradition* (1978)

Isn't this precisely what Jesus was pursuing in his arguments with the Scribes and Pharisees?

A tradition in good health combines both adherence and subversion; it is marked by creativity and results in **human flourishing**.

Engagement

If cultural engagement is indeed our vocation, then we need to be **theologically literate**, and to know our church history. We need to reclaim a holistic (and denominationally non-partisan) understanding of tradition.

Theology, Tradition, Culture
Change to historic buildings is one important place where these issues of theology and culture are played out.

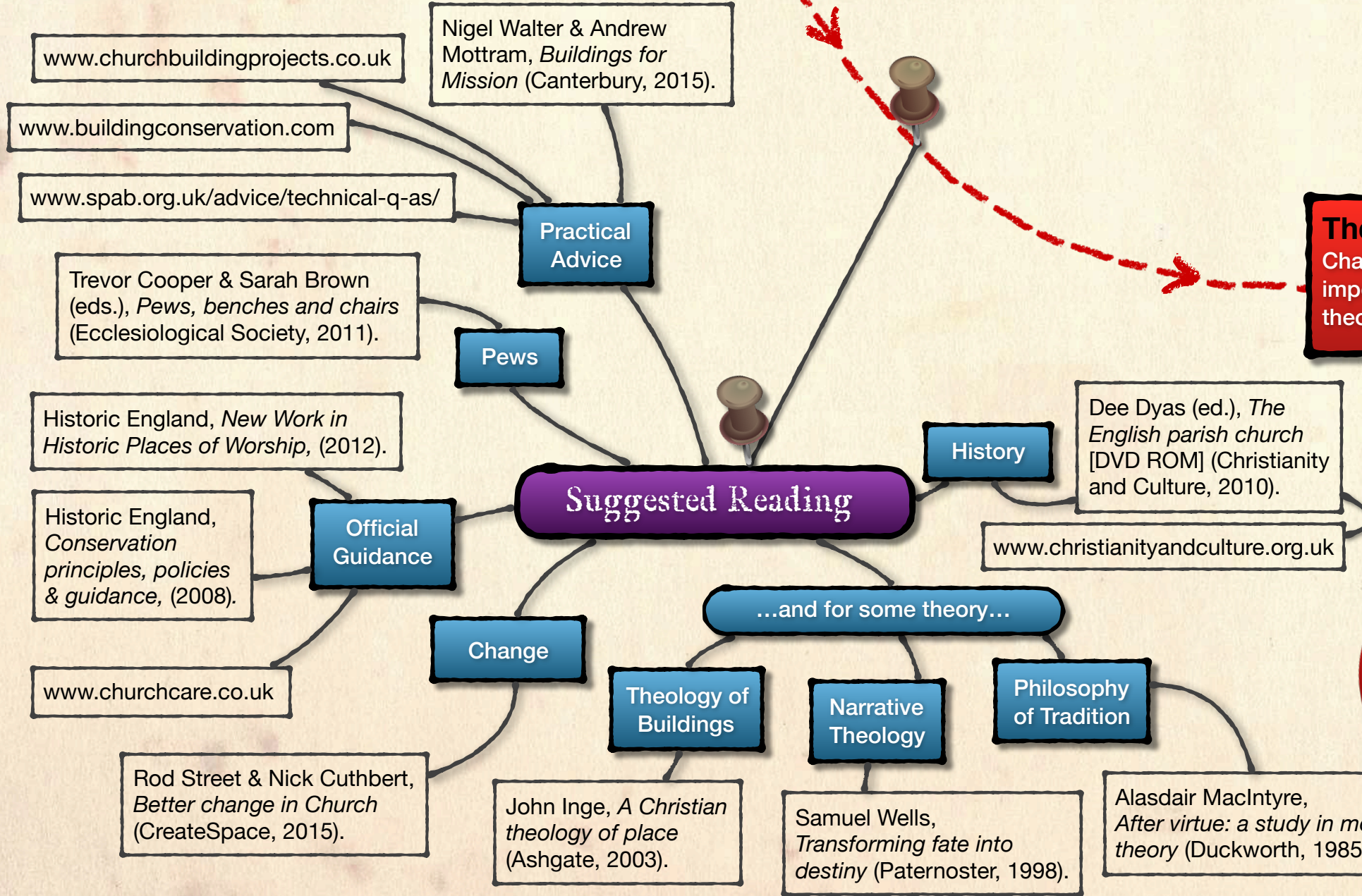
The End

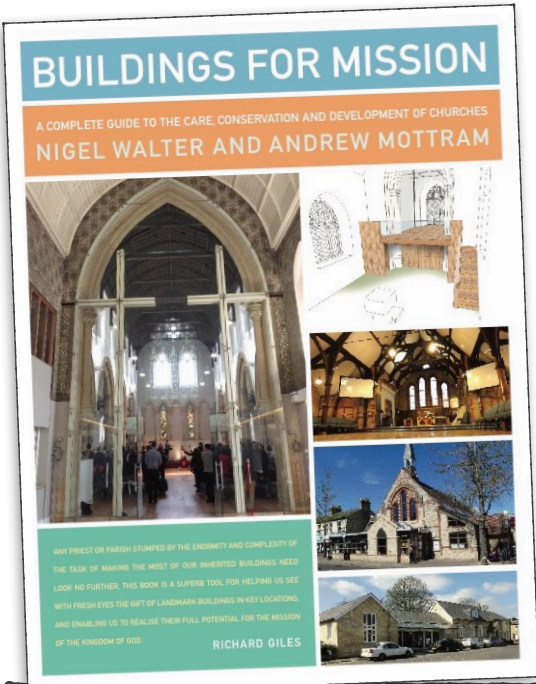


More than once Jesus described the kingdom of heaven as a party. Parties are about being **convivial**. People then, and now, easily assume that God is the opposite, that He is '**contravivial**'.

You can see the same opposition mirrored in our approach to tradition (**static** or **dynamic**) and to historic buildings (**dead** monuments or **living** buildings).

'Choose Life!'



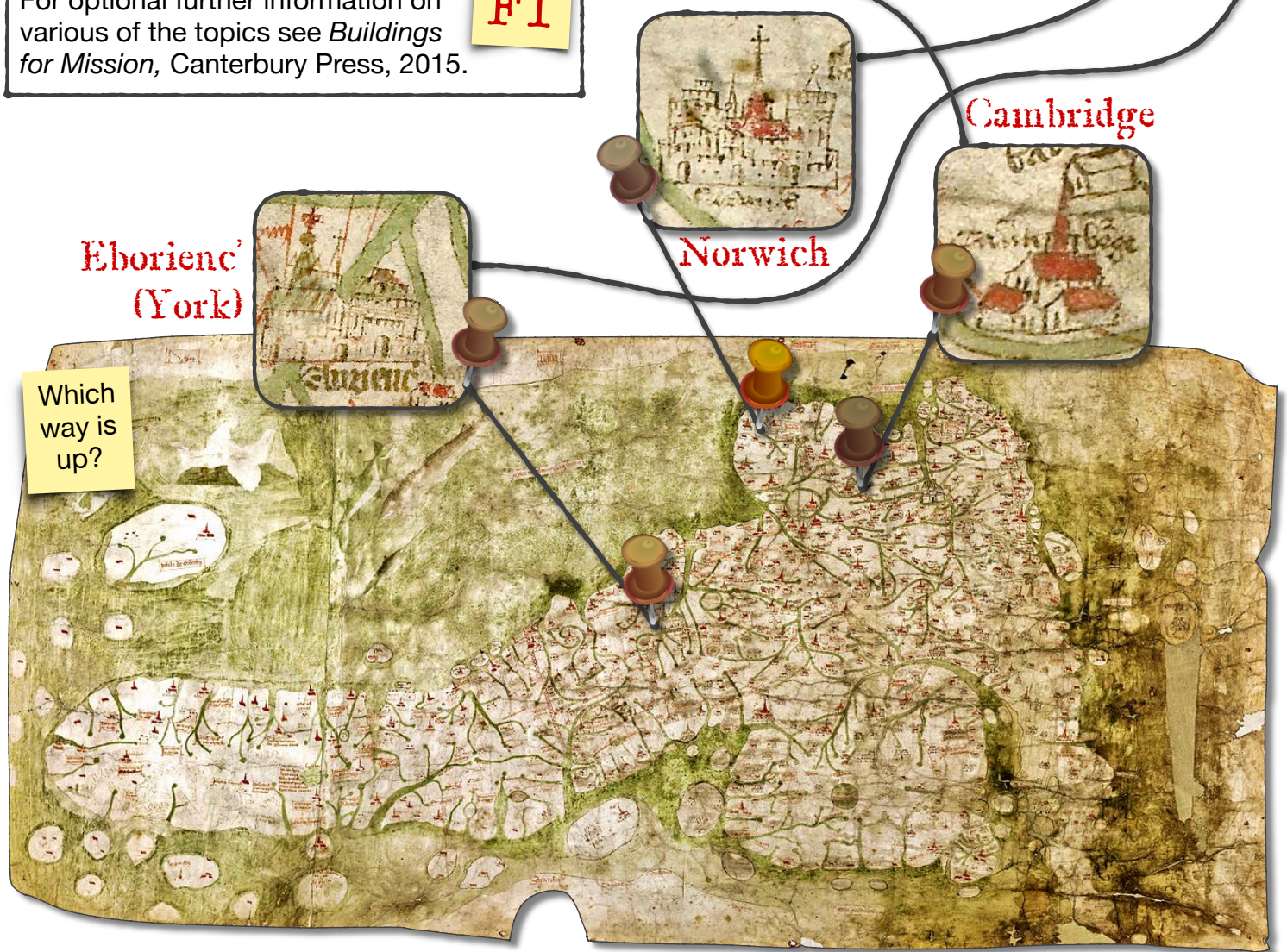


For optional further information on various of the topics see *Buildings for Mission*, Canterbury Press, 2015.

BfM
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Nigel Walter is a **Cambridge**-based Specialist Conservation Architect; much of his work involves change to historic churches. He is a member of the Church Buildings Council and is active in his local church.

This Guide is one product of Nigel's PhD research at the University of **York** ('To Live is to Change': tradition, narrative and community in the conservation of church buildings). The project considers the implications (for both conservation professionals and church communities) of the traditional approach to churches as living buildings, and includes a case study of five medieval churches in the Diocese of **Norwich**.



Which way is up?

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The Gough Map of Great Britain: <http://www.goughmap.org/map>
Image: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>

nhw502@york.ac.uk

www.churchbuildingprojects.co.uk

For an animation based on this booklet, see: www.youtube.com/user/churchbuild