**ANNUAL REPORT**

**ECCLESIASTICAL EXEMPTION**

**Report on the work of the Conservation Officer and the operation of Section 98 Procedures, 2023**

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1. This is the twenty ninth annual report on the operation of the adopted procedures of the Methodist Church in respect of Ecclesiastical Exemption.

2. In December 1992 the Department of National Heritage issued a Code of Practice for the control of works to places of worship which are listed buildings or are within conservation areas and indicated that those Churches which adopted the Code would continue to enjoy ecclesiastical exemption from listed building and conservation area control by local planning authorities. Subsequently, The Ecclesiastical Exemption (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Order 1994 came into force on 1 October 1994. This has now been superseded in England by The Ecclesiastical Exemption (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas (England) (Order) 2010 and in Wales by The Ecclesiastical Exemption (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas (Wales) (Order) 2018. Section 98 of Methodist Standing Orders sets out the detailed procedures to be followed before the Methodist Church considers whether to approve a project for "listed building works".

3. Although this report is primarily concerned with projects that had to be considered under Section 98 of Standing Orders during 2023, this represents only a "snapshot" of the work of the Connexional Conservation Officer. The full picture is one of a process which stretches over a number of years as many of the projects approved in any one year started the process in the previous year or years. Similarly, the visits and preliminary discussions carried out during 2023 will often result in projects being submitted in later years.

4. During 2023, we were notified of 256 (9% increase from 2022) projects affecting listed buildings and buildings in conservation areas on the consents website. These all had to be checked to determine whether Section 98 would apply. The Connexional Conservation Officer visited twenty four chapels during the year, either to discuss ideas for projects, or potential projects or to see completed projects. Four visits were made by a sub-committee of the Listed Buildings Advisory Committee (LBAC) during the year. These were to **Victoria Hall** in Sheffield, **Central** in York, **Mount Zion/Heptonstall**, **and Cartway** in Bridgnorth. Each of these cases was complex and it was decided a site visit and discussion with the managing trustees would be beneficial in understanding all of the issues involved. A number of the twenty four visits were also accompanied by the District Property Secretary for that area.

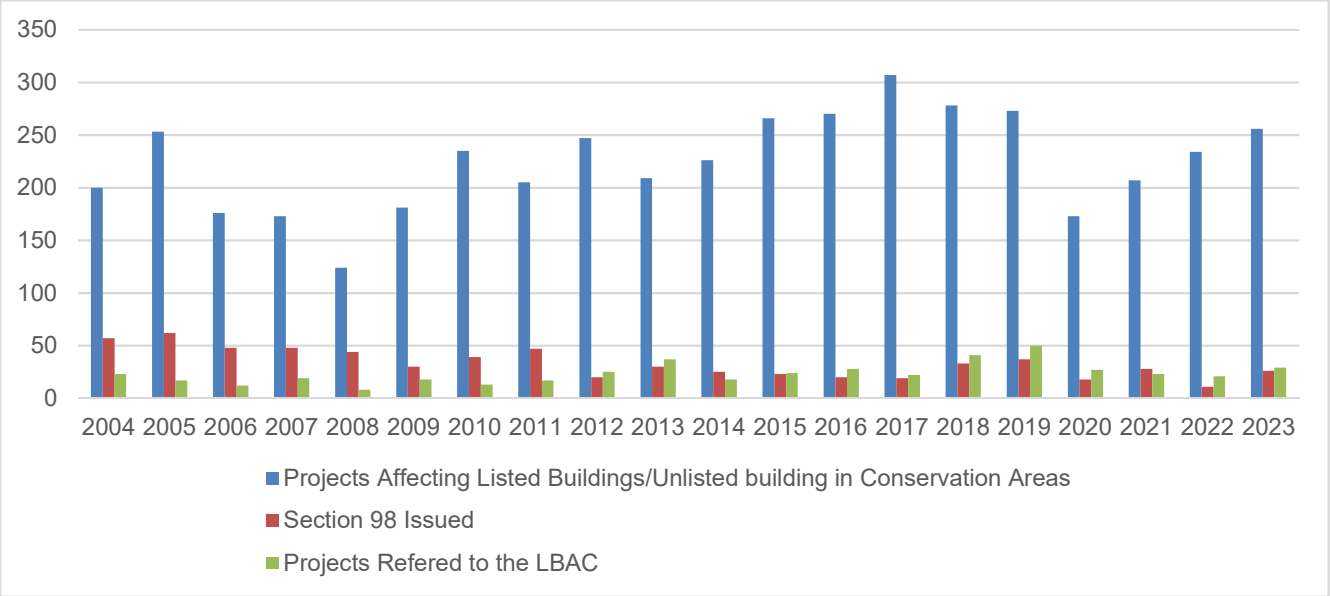
5. These initial discussions are an important element of the process. It is often possible to advise churches not to proceed with inappropriate options at an early stage and thus save time, energy and money. Similarly, projects can often be modified to reduce the impact of changes to historic fabric. This is much easier for everyone to accept if discussions are held before the project is finalised.

6. Twenty six projects successfully completed the procedures set out in Section 98 of Standing Orders during 2023. Over 124 were given conservation authorisation and 132 are awaiting consideration. It should be noted that successful completion of these procedures is not the same as full project consent. A project is only approved when all outstanding matters, e.g. financial viability and grant submissions have been resolved and Section 98 only relates to the listed building or conservation area element of a project. Final consent is given by the Methodist District bodies for projects affecting chapels in their District but only when the conservation issues have been completed successfully. For large projects it is usually finance which is the last matter to be resolved.

7. Of the twenty six projects, all affected Grade II or Grade II* listed buildings in England and Wales and included works to install solar panels, Air Source Heat Pumps, works of major re-ordering and two involved works to deal with dry rot.

8. Table 1 overleaf shows that there has been a steady increase in the number of projects created affecting listed buildings or buildings in conservation areas as churches slowly recover post COVID 19. There has been an increase in the number of Section 98 projects determined and an increased number referred to the LBAC completed the approval process.

**Table 1**




Listed Buildings Advisory Committee

9. The established procedure of the LBAC is that projects that only involve minor alterations of limited importance to the character of historic chapels do not need to be individually considered by the LBAC, providing they fall within policy guidelines specifically approved by the LBAC or established by previous LBAC decisions. As a result, only twenty nine of the projects were considered by the LBAC. This is more than the number of projects dealt with by the LBAC in the previous year. Again, far more projects in total were referred to the LBAC, but not all of them completed the Section 98 procedures during the year. In addition, two of the projects referred to the LBAC were informal, and one concerned unapproved listed building works.

10. The LBAC was notified, however, of all of the projects (including those affecting unlisted buildings in conservation areas) received and was free to request details of any of them. This occurred in several cases.

11. Revd Anthony Parkinson continues as Chair and Dr Peter Forsaith as Deputy Chair. Sadly, one of our long term members, Dr Christopher Wakeling OBE died in 2023 and will be very much missed. Rev Dr Adrian Burdon stepped down from the LBAC to concentrate on other duties. We shall be advertising for new members in 2024. The LBAC held quarterly meetings, with three held online and one face to face meeting in Manchester.

12. Terms of Reference for the LBAC are in place and are reviewed on a regular basis.

Consultations

13. Under Standing Order 982, in addition to the advice of the LBAC, the Methodist Church has to consult with the Local Planning Authority, the National Amenity Societies and either Historic England or, in Wales, Cadw. In addition, a public notice (either on site or online) has to be displayed for 28 days outside the affected building (or online) and a similar notice published in a local newspaper so that interested parties can comment on the proposed project. As a result of the Newman Report in 1997 into Ecclesiastical Exemption it was agreed that it would only be necessary for a newspaper advertisement to be placed when the project affected the external appearance of the building or was in respect of a grade I or II* building.

14. Where we receive advance notice of a project which is thought may be controversial, an informal consultation may be carried out to obtain preliminary views. This is often helpful in refining a project before it is formally submitted to the Connexional Conservation Officer of the Methodist Church.

15. Although there are six National Amenity Societies, it has been agreed that details need only to be sent to Historic Buildings and Places (previously Ancient Monuments Society), the Georgian Group and the Victorian Society, and they

will in turn inform the other three societies as appropriate. The application may also be sent to the Joint Committee of the National Amenity Societies who represents these and similar groups. This arrangement is particularly beneficial in reducing unnecessary bureaucracy and paperwork as we have almost no chapels that pre-date 1715 (the end date for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings), a small but increasing number of listed chapels post 1914 (the start date for the Twentieth Century Society) and, although Methodist sites are of general interest to the Council for British Archaeology, there is no formal requirement to consult them over proposals.

16. During 2023 we received a good level of response from the amenity bodies with a high frequency from Historic England and Historic Buildings and Places. The latter also attended an onsite meeting with Central, York to help improve the scheme of re-ordering at this Grade II* church. We are also grateful to the Victorian Society for their input at this meeting via a Teams link. Local Planning Authorities continue to respond intermittently and the Georgian Group responds consistently well on projects relating to buildings constructed or re-ordered during this period. Representations tend to be in support of applications, and if matters of detail are raised there tends to be clear indication of the level of objection or creative suggestions of how these could be dealt with. We are grateful for their interest and contributions.

17. The project for major extension and intervention at Truro produced considerable objection from the consultees and we are grateful to Historic England for their continued involvement in this case. In most cases any concerns raised by consultees were dealt with by negotiation with the applicants, resulting in revisions to the submissions, or by imposing conditions on the approvals.

Time-scale

18. One of the concerns regularly expressed about the Section 98 procedures is the delay that it may create. For major projects this is seldom a problem as the financial issues are generally the last to be resolved. The procedures do, however, build-in an automatic delay for small projects because of the four week consultation period. Sometimes delays are caused by the applicant trustees because they do not follow the correct procedures or fail to respond promptly to requests for more information or delay posting the site notice.

19. If everything runs smoothly, all the information provided when the project is registered and no objections or comments are received, it is possible to minimise delays. The projects with the longest delays were often minor proposals where there were considerable delays waiting for information necessary to carry out consultations or those that required modification as a result of objections or comments. Other delays were caused by the registration of projects before full details had been worked up. Conversely some major projects received approval in a relatively short timescale because of the extensive negotiations, perhaps including a formal consultation, which was carried out before a submission was made.

Complex Projects

20. The projects below were the subject of visits (sometimes multiple) by a subcommittee of the LBAC.

21. **Holt Methodist Church -** The design of the original scheme resulted in concerns being expressed by the LBAC and the responding consultees. As a result it was decided that a site visit by a sub-committee of the LBAC should be carried out to gain a better understanding of the purpose and scope of the proposals. The main concerns centred on the extent of pew removal given that this is our only example of Thomas Jeckyll's work. Following various negotiations a compromised solution was agreed and Section 98 issued. The whole purpose of the exercise was, however, to create an accessible building with a new kitchen and mezzanine within the main worship space. The church continues to fundraise but has satisfactorily discharged conditions and has provided us with the necessary details to implement the scheme.

22. **Truro Methodist Church -** The scheme proposed a significant extension of the building to the north to provide café, meeting rooms, event spaces and a new level access entrance to the side of the chapel building. Initially, we were presented by a scheme which effectively gutted the separately listed Sunday school retaining the exterior walls only. Very limited consultation had taken place with the Conservation Officer and all consultees objected to the proposal. The Conservation Officer worked closely with the LBAC and Historic England to negotiate an improved scheme which retained the significant elements of the building but sympathetically altered and extended it to create the spaces

needed to meet the church's vision. The scheme has now received news of a large Heritage Lottery Grant and fundraising is progressing well with a large contribution from the Government's levelling up fund.

23. **Mousehole -** This project, at a significant Grade II* listed building, involved the repair of the building following a dry rot outbreak. This includes rectifying the source of the moisture and the replacement of the floor. All seating, staircases and pulpit will need to be removed and reinstated once the dry rot has been eradicated. All consultees agreed to a specification detailed by a Conservation Accredited architectural practice, which was essential for this project. Funding is proving difficult with the Sunday school being sold to cover the costs.

24. **Grove Street, Retford -** The Grade II listed church sought permission for the removal of nine pews, re-levelling the floor, redecoration (church, staircase and vestibule), re-carpeting and re-cushioning of the pews. This partial re-ordering will allow a more informal style of worship, improved accessibility and more flexible use of the worship space to facilitate concerts, exhibitions, and school/community celebrations. A degree of objection was received regarding the extent of pew removal, floor level changes and the quality of the plans submitted. However, thanks to collaboration with the church these issues were satisfactorily resolved, including the adaptation of pews to facilitate the creation of flexible spaces. We hope that by supporting this work this building can be removed from the Historic England 'At Risk' Register.

25. **Trinity, Penarth -** This application included a solar panel array and changes to the entrance to make it more accessible. The listed building approval was more straightforward than the planning application, with the local authority objecting to matters of detail, largely of the door and the position of the letterbox. Working with the church we managed to resolve these issues.

Refusals and Appeals

26. No projects were refused during the year.

27. The Appeals process is reviewed regularly in the light of experience and comments received.

General Principles

28. As a result of our experience with these projects and other projects which are still under consideration, it is possible to make some general comments about the type of alterations which are generally acceptable in listed buildings.

29. Alterations to entrance areas, vestibules and other spaces inside the main doors of chapels are generally acceptable to the conservation bodies, particularly when they are sited under galleries. This stems from the recognition that the interior of chapels were generally designed to be seen when seated and looking forward and therefore alterations around the entrance do not affect the interior character significantly.

30. There is rather more concern about alterations to communion areas, although it appears to be generally accepted that the need for greater flexibility justifies the enlargement of communion areas, provided that original communion rails are retained, usually by being made capable of temporary removal. The removal of some pews from the front of chapels is generally acceptable, and truncation of pews in the central area are encouraged if we are to be an inclusive church. The loss of pulpits and organs is generally, however, resisted strongly as these provide the major focal points of historic interiors.

31. The idea of a full horizontal sub-division of galleried chapels, with an upper-level worship area and ancillary rooms below, remains a popular approach for some congregations. It is seen as a particularly practical way of reducing the maintenance and running costs of a large volume. Such an approach is often the most damaging type of alteration that can be considered for an historic chapel interior, as it usually destroys the sense of space, alters the proportion and results in the loss of the majority of the fittings. Managing Trustees are dissuaded from pursuing such projects. Internal alterations to ancillary premises are generally uncontroversial, but extensive demolition or new extensions can be more difficult. Many of our schoolrooms and ancillary spaces are of later date than the associated chapels, are to the rear, and are of lesser architectural value. If, however, they form part of the curtilage of a listed building then they too are "listed" and may not be altered or demolished without consent under Standing Orders.

32. Again, buildings in conservation areas may make a valuable contribution to the character of the area and careful consideration will need to be given for proposals to alter or demolish them. In some cases, however, the schoolroom is the earliest building on the site, having originally been the chapel. Also by the late nineteenth century whole complexes of chapel, halls, vestries and other spaces were being designed as a unified whole. In these situations alterations and extensions may not be straightforward.

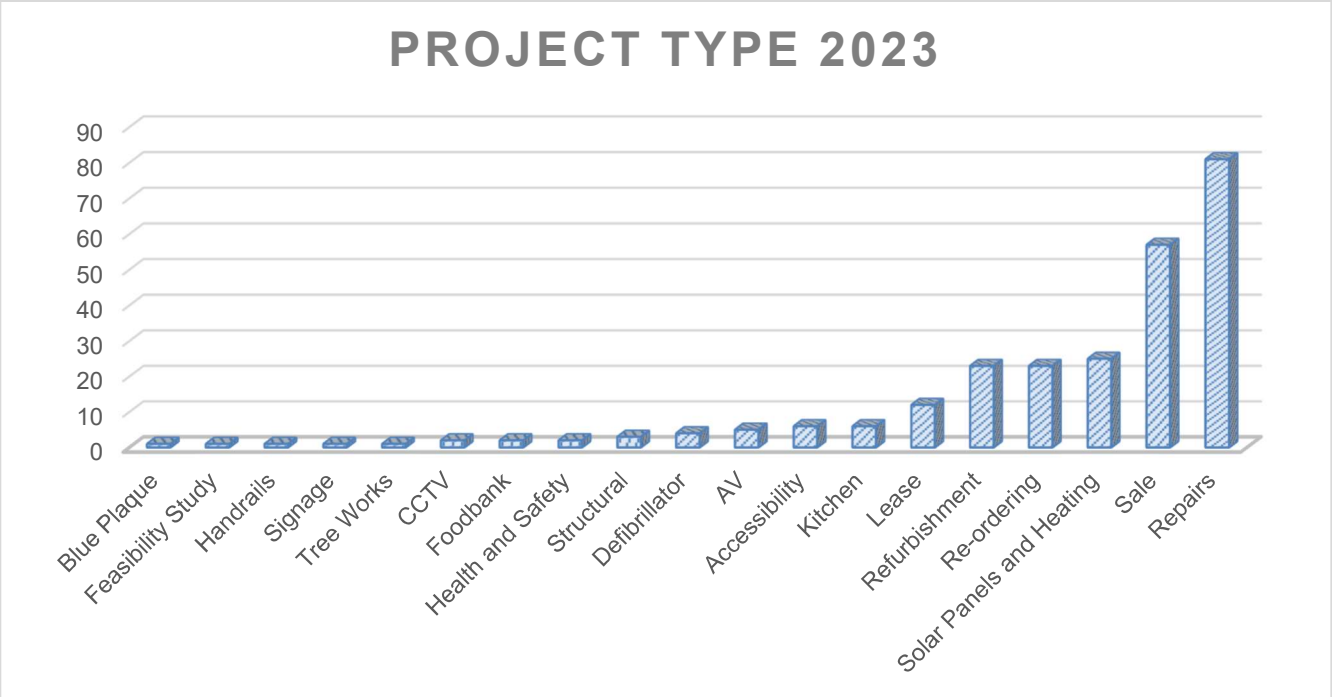
33. As a result of the Equalities Act, accessibility remains a significant issue. Many of our older chapels were not designed in terms of providing access for all, and finding ways of overcoming shortcomings may not be straightforward. There is sometimes a tension between the need to provide access and the impact on the character of a listed building.

34. The total removal of all pews (or all ground floor pews) usually results in some objections, particularly when the pews are of an early date. Indeed, we are seeing more application for wholesale pew removal following the need to create flexible spaces in a post pandemic world. The removal of later pews is often regretted because of their contribution to the character of the interior, but seldom results in a strong objection, particularly when representative examples are retained. Each case is examined on its merits. Given the pressure to create flexible space we are concerned that we are losing some examples of high significance, including curvilinear pews which are becoming rarer. We need to establish the extent of historic fabric remaining in order to make informed decisions.

35. Applications for defibrillators continue as the Church recognises the need to have these life-saving units on our buildings, which are often centrally located. Equally new and replacement AV systems are being installed in our older buildings as we recognise the important of digital media in our services and community activities. We are also encouraged by the number of applications for solar panels and Air Source Heat Pumps at our listed churches, which are often approved. We are keen to encourage such applications and feel that our historic places of worship can contribute significantly to the Net Zero target of 2030.

36. The following table illustrates the main types of project approved during the year.

**Table 2**




Guidance Notes

37. A series of guidance notes has been produced to assist Managing Trustees when considering alterations to a listed chapel. Some of the main topics are listed below. It is intended that further notes will be produced to cover other topics as required.

a) A guidance note on the subject of removal of pews was agreed by the Connexional Property Committee on 1/10/96 and has been updated regularly since.

b) It is the general practice that where consent is given to remove fittings of significance, it is a condition of the consent that a photographic record is made prior to removal. A detailed guidance note setting out the required standard is issued with the approval notice where appropriate. This requires a set of archive photographs to be deposited with the Conservation Office of the Methodist Church and with a local archive such as the County Records Office. During the year, three approvals had this condition imposed. Where consent is granted for the removal of fittings, a standard condition is imposed requiring that the fittings are to be offered for sale if they are not to be used elsewhere. In the case of the wholesale removal of pews, samples are to be retained within the building.

c) Where Managing Trustees intend to submit an application for significant changes to a listed chapel they are required to prepare Statements of Significance and Need to accompany the application. These are to be two separate documents, one balancing the other. The purpose of this is twofold:

   i. To help the church to assess in their own words the things which comprise the special significance of their building, be they architectural features, fine furnishings, an attractive setting or a high quality organ, and to contrast and compare this with the perceived needs which are to be fulfilled through the proposal.

   ii. To enable those charged with considering the application, (the LBAC, secular authorities and interest groups), to form their opinions quickly and fairly, equipped with the basic facts, secure in the knowledge that the church has a clear idea of its chosen direction and the consequences of this.

   iii. The response to this requirement has been encouraging, with many helpful submissions, all of which have assisted with the decision making process.

d) A guidance note is available "Disability and Access Provision in Historic Chapels", which gives guidance on the range of measures which should be considered.

e) The Conservation Section of the Methodist Church is regularly updated with guidance notes and information, including advice on appointing architects, local listing, the use of terne coated steel as a replacement for lead, War Memorial Conservation, Window protection, window repair and carbon reduction. Our News, Funding and Training webpage is updated regularly.

Photographic Database

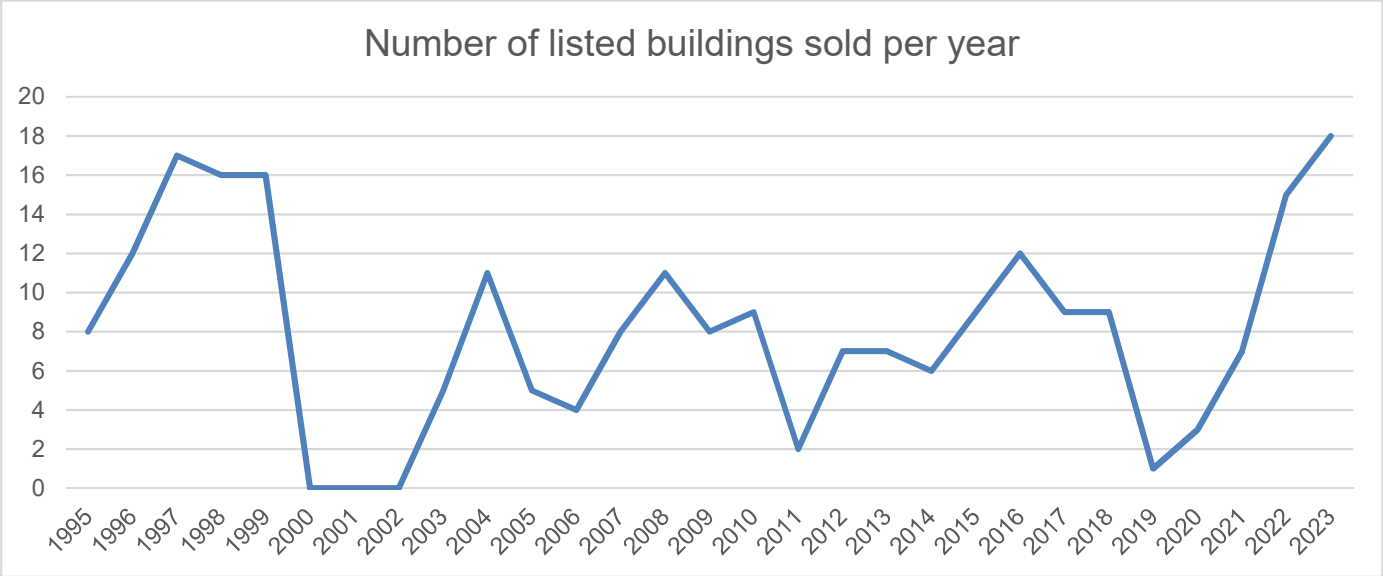
38. The Methodist Church has an extensive collection of photographs and slides of chapels. In the long term it is intended that the photographs of listed buildings will be available for viewing via the Internet. The photographs are linked to data about the buildings themselves, including the list description. In the meantime, work continues on newly received material and identifying gaps in the collection which need to be filled.

Listed Building Fund

39. Three grants worth £2750 were made during the year and offered to help with the additional costs resulting from the need for higher specifications for repair, renewal and alteration, including one to Glaisdale Head which will contribute to a roof repairs specification to help remove them from the Historic England Heritage 'At Risk' Register.

Sales

40. The table below shows the number of listed buildings sold per year. From 2010 onwards the sales are recorded as projects created for the disposal of listed church buildings. Whilst a project may have been created for a sale it does not mean that the sale has progressed to full disposal, so it is likely that whilst a project has been raised the building remains in Methodist Church ownership, but that sale is likely.




41. It is also true that given that very few or no buildings were sold in 2019 or to some extent in 2020 the number following the Covid pandemic has risen sharply. However, the number of annual sales of listed buildings pre-COVID 19 was 8, post COVID (2019 onwards) this number has risen only slightly to an annual average of 9. Only one of the churches where a project was raised for a sale in 2023 was in Wales. The District with the highest number of sales in 2023 was Bristol with 4 sales, with Darlington and Northampton next both with three listed building projects registered for disposal.

Other work dealt with by the LBAC

42. The LBAC has regular agenda items including:

a) Updates from the Property Development and Heritage Committees.

b) Action for Hope and the Net Zero and Climate Change Work of the Methodist Church

43. The Committee was also updated in 2023 on New Listings (Edgworth Methodist Church), Listing Assessments (Walworth Methodist Church), and updates to the Heritage at Risk Register (Longton Central Hall). Members also completed the mandatory Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Training. In addition to their statutory role they were asked about information on Oxford Based Architect, Thomas Rayson (Burford Methodist Church) and asked for comment on a Historic Organ Paper for presentation to the PDC at their April meeting. In October 2023 the Committee gave advice between meetings on matters of building construction, chapel photography, art conservation and the conservation of stained glass windows and advocated for the creation of a working party to discuss matters of Items of Historic Value as well as being updated on the National Churches Trust Cherish Project. The Committee are also welcome to raise any issues which they believe the wider Methodist Church should be concerned about, and we welcome these suggestions.

Other work of the Connexional Conservation Officer

44. In addition to their work administering the Ecclesiastical Exemption and the LBAC meetings the Connexional Conservation Officer has been involved in the following activities in 2023:

a) Providing expert advice on technical repairs, QI works and confirming the need for consent on all works of maintenance, repair, alteration and extension for both listed buildings and buildings in conservation areas;

b) Helping churches prepare listed building applications, including assisting with Statements of Significance and Heritage Impact Assessments;

c) Visiting various sites around the Connexion to discuss Project Development and carry out pre-application discussions;

d) Offering advice (including design guidance) on listed building alteration, extension, alterations to unlisted buildings in

Conservation areas, locally listed buildings, and works to scheduled ancient monuments;

e) Convening the LBAC meetings and preparing papers, writing minutes, corresponding with consultees, circulating correspondence;

f) Carrying out an Annual Conditions Discharge exercise on approved S.98 schemes;

g) Ensuring any urgent works are carried out in accordance with approved procedures and advising on unapproved listed building works;

h) Representing the Methodist Church at external meetings, such as the Historic Places of Worship Forum for England, Scotland and Wales, Historic Religious Buildings Alliance, attending the Steering Group of the Cherish Project (National Churches Trust) and a working party with Historic England to create a spending bid for submission to Central Government;

i) Co-ordinating a joint response with Connexional colleagues to help Trustees (Circuit, District and Church) sustain examples of significant listed churches, such as Calderdale (Heptonstall, Mount Zion and Brighouse) and Cornwall (Resilience Funding);

j) Developing partnership working, such as Heritage Lincolnshire, Churches Conservation Trust, Cytûn: Churches together in Wales, and Valley Heritage etc.;

k) Developing a project to Take Stock of our listed buildings in Yorkshire West (negotiating Historic England and National Heritage Lottery Fund);

l) Developing a strategy for the Digitisation of Connexional Property Files held in Room 17 (c. 1800 files);

m) Liaising with the Methodist Church's Organ Advisory Service;

n) Attending DPS Meetings and Superintendent Conference representing Conservation Issues;

o) Meeting with the Historic Chapels Trust and Chapels Society to discuss their concern over disposal of historic places of worship;

p) Taking part in a series of online workshops to encourage a Community of Practice on Property Matters with Learning Network colleagues;

q) Attending regular meetings with Connexional colleagues, such as Action for Hope, Heritage and E&G;

r) Supporting churches to make representations on neighbouring planning applications;

s) Providing advice on VAT and the listed places of worship grant fund as well as other historic building grant funds;

t) Writing inspirational story articles and circulating news and updates via Property Matters, Signpost for Ministry and on our own News, Funding and Training webpages;

u) Liaising with the Churches Trust for Cumbria over relevant issues, such as a maintenance co-operative;

v) Co-ordinating a Working Party to create a register of items of historic value following the submission of a paper on Historic Organs to the Property Development Committee; and

w) Meeting with URC and Baptists equivalents to consider ways of collaborative working.

Conclusion

45. In general terms the system appears to be working well. There is a general recognition of the way the system works and we are finding that churches are contacting us (on the whole) before works commence. Where unapproved works are carried out we believe we have a robust enough system in place to adequately deal with this. However, due to the frequent changes in Managing Trusteeship and the loss of longer term volunteers there is still ignorance in some quarters about the correct procedures to be followed. Consequently, we have developed guidance which will be sent out to all new Superintendents for the new Connexional year which clearly explains the procedures.

46. We believe that churches are now progressing with repair works and projects as they gain more confidence, clear mission and vision post COVID 19. We are however, concerned about the lack of human resource and active volunteers within our churches and fear that this is becoming more of an issue than a lack of financial resource. We are keen to continue to input into the Property Strategy and to develop a separate Historic Building strategy for those areas with a high number of listed buildings. The funding landscape, particularly for repairs, has improved but there are fewer people available to complete funding applications and the loss of the GPOW grant still means that churches continue to compete with other secular buildings for the larger grants.

47. We are also concerned that a lack of human resource prohibits active community consultation and whilst we continue to argue for Historic Building Support Officers to upskill and enable Trustees we are conscious that the need to work cross denominationally and with external partners is fundamental to ensuring better community engagement by our historic churches.

48. We believe that the advice and support we give to the rest of the Connexion brings benefit and the Exemption allows us to consider mission as a material consideration in our assessment of applications for change, which in turn allows our buildings to adapt and evolve to facilitate the changing ways we do church. We continue to encourage Managing Trustees to contact us at their earliest convenience so we can support them through this essential change.

JB 23rd February 2024