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Valley girl

Church services

Jane Wheatley

The church in the next village has got more than £200,000 of funding for renovations. At our market on Saturday, Jean, who makes the scones, put her hand on my arm: "We're going to have a proper big kitchen in the church," she said. "And," she lowered her voice, "underfloor heating." Her eyes shone: "It's going to be lovely."

Another church a few miles away runs an internet café in the nave; and at Yarpole in the north of the county, they're planning to relocate the community shop and post office from a Portakabin to the church, with a café and loos as well.

I love a church, particularly an empty one: best when you come upon it on a country walk and can sit quietly in a pew by yourself, smelling the cold stone and the acrid whiff of last Sunday's chrysanthemums. I like the silent austerity of it. And I am alarmed by the prospect of clattering teacups and brightly coloured pin boards and, I don't know, all sorts of activities.

But I am a fair-weather Anglican and wanting a church just to be there is not only selfish but, as many people recently have told me, wrong-headed. Churches never used to be reserved only for worship: it was the Victorians who dictated the sit-up-straight, eyes-front approach. Pre-Reformation, they were a hive of activity: market stalls, school rooms, courts of justice – even beer brewing and cockfighting in the churchyard.

"People brought the business of their life into the church to be hallowed," says the Rev Andrew Mottram, who advises parishes on how to usher community back into their churches and, crucially, how to make them pay their way. The church at Yarpole, for example, requires heating and maintenance but is occupied for only four hours a week by a small and ageing congregation.

Andrew used to be the priest at All Saints in the centre of Hereford. A few weeks after he took over, the council issued a dangerous structure notice: the 200ft-high spire was in danger of toppling over on to Marks & Spencer. Scaffolding went up over that weekend; English Heritage bankrolled vital repairs on the understanding that the church would find a way to earn its keep.

There had been a charity shop in the lady chapel: “It smelt of stale clothes, fags and damp, cold air,” says Andrew. All Saints now has a brilliant, constantly busy café run by chef Bill Sewell, who had already put Illy coffee and tasty, sustaining food into the crypt at St Mary-le-Bow in London. “Warmth, food and a lavatory, that’s what brings people in,” says Andrew. “There is communion three times a week at lunchtime, bells ring when the priest comes out of the vestry, and noise is far less of a problem when it’s busy than when it’s sepulchral.”

Has the congregation grown? “Not hugely, but the church is full of people and of life being celebrated and lived. And there is the enigmatic chancel – Peter Brook’s ‘power of the empty stage’ – for those who choose a moment for contemplation.”

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