



Building on History: The Church of England

Dr Ronan Williams Archbishop of Canterbury

We often take for granted that things have always been like this. But actually of course, to understand the past is to understand how things change, is to understand the changing patterns of demography of style, of language and if we don't understand that we get into a very, very fixed and rather anxious position where it's as if we always have to defend the status quo.

Revd Neil Evans Director of Professional Development Diocese of London

I think it's very important for churches to be aware of their past, and I think the identity that churches have is absolutely crucially locked in to where they've come from. Certainly my experience as a parish priest, as a vicar of two parishes in London, it was once I discovered where the church had come from in its past that I began to make sense of some of its present.

Narrator (VO):

London is a diverse and multicultural city with particular challenges for all faiths.

The Building on History programme is a Knowledge transfer project, offering unique access to many of the historical records of the church of England to inform current and future strategies.

With funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the project involves four partners - the Open University, Kings College, London, the Diocese of London and Lambeth Palace Library.

John Wolffe OU Researcher Building on History

Well, knowledge transfer is about building on existing research that I and others have already done, it's about making the archives at Lambeth Palace accessible in new ways to people outside the academic community in a way that can really make a cultural or social difference to the wider community

Declan Kelly Director of Library Church of England

Lambeth Palace Library is the main record office and history centre for the Church of England going back before the reformation. I think it's really important that a project like this goes ahead because it's all about history. We've already had one session where we've invited people from different faiths, many of who went away saying 'we'd never thought of using our history like that. We thought of it as something perhaps dry and dusty, telling an interesting story of the past but not that relevant to today'. What I think is really interesting about this project, it's taking history and it's putting it very firmly in the here and now, today and saying this is what's relevant for what we do today.

Narrator (VO):

The project concentrates on research on 19th century history.

John Wolffe:

Well, we're particularly interested in the 19th Century because of the parallels with migration to London and indeed within London. This was a period when numerous people were moving to the capital, to the big city. We can see the same nowadays, people coming, in this case from abroad in the early 21st century, but still many similarities of a rapidly changing and very mobile population.

John Wolffe:

We came up with a series of themes, particularly thinking about secularisation, what is happening to church attendance, why and how certain churches in the 19th century and indeed nowadays can buck the trend which is generally downwards but by no means universally so.

Dr Ronan Williams:

A lot of people have, I think; a very simple story of the secularisation of Britain and sometimes it's a story that really believers have just as well as unbelievers. Once upon a time the churches were full and now they're empty. Well actually, if you look back to the 19th century, churches weren't that full, sometimes too many churches were built for the communities that were around in a very, very optimistic spirit.

Narrator (VO):

Bishop Charles Blomfield built hundreds of churches across the capital during his time as Bishop of London in the first half of the nineteenth century. But it was his successor Bishop Tait who took on the challenge of how to fill those churches and who reached out to the whole community.

Richard Palmer:

Librarian & Archivist Lambeth Palace Library Here we have just two of the diaries of Bishop Tate. The year 1587, he decided to take his mission to the streets and the diary records about estemary preaching. He would preach to the gypsies in their encampment in Shepherds Bush.

Narrator (VO):

In the absence of a welfare state the church took on the role of carer and educator reaching out to the poorest communities in London.

Declan Kelly:

On the right here we have St Bartholews, Bethnal Green, we have a whole street of activities that are going on from day schools, tobacco socialibles for the men, little girls sewing classes, boys carving classes employ otherwise 'idle hands'. They clearly picked on certain social groups that are hard to get at and he has come up with things to engage and involve them. Moving forward to the 21st century you can see a vicar saying what would I put on to engage with my community now? How would I engage with the Parish in Bethnal Green in the 21st Century.

Neil Evans:

The Church is very much involved in today are working with those perhaps in poverty, in debt, along side that would be very ordinary, in inverted commas, projects such as parent and toddler groups and working with young people, young children, summer clubs, all sorts of projects.

Narrator (VO):

The role of the church as educator became more formalised in the nineteenth century.

Dr Ronan Williams:

People sometimes forget that the whole ideal of universal education was something that the Church contributed towards society. If the Church hadn't been there and indeed the non-conformist bodies as well, providing basic primary education for everybody, it wouldn't have happened. Now we've moved on. The state has properly taken on responsibility for that but

very often still in partnership with the Church of England and with other Christian communities. Increasingly, of course; with non-Christian communities too.

John Wolffe:

In East Finchley, the Church was built in 1846, in 1847 they opened a school and in 1855 there is a fascinating pamphlet reporting on the first 8 years of the school, claiming that it has made a dramatic difference to the moral character of the area.

Narrator (VO):

The Building on History project aims to disseminate its findings across the Church of England - and to a wider public.

Neil Evans:

One of the main outcomes that I'm hoping to see from this is some sort of a tool kit so that an individual parish can pick it up and can see how it can explore its history and what it can do not only with the findings but how it can make those findings relevant for its mission and action plan. So in other words, its not just about saying, this is our identity, though importantly it is that, but its also saying, so what are we going to do about it? If its modelling good practice for the Diocese of London then I would firmly suggest that its modelling good practice for the Church across the country and not just the Church of England but across denominations and I think resonance is very much across other faiths as well.

Dr Ronan Williams:

The greatest mistake is for the Church to think 'we have nothing to learn, we did it successfully in the 19th century and that's it'. On the contrary, we learn from the 19th century something of the method by which, in a time of rapid change; you can respond effectively.

John Wolff:

We hope the project will also look beyond the church in. We hope that the impact of the project will also extend to beyond the Church, to the local communities of which the Church itself has become an important part of their history. And also we would like to think that in exploring the inter-relationship between the past and present in one kind of institute that we may be developing models that can be applied to other kinds of very different and entirely secular institutions in the future.