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Change Over Time, Volume 9, Number 1, Spring 2019, pp. 48-71 (Article)

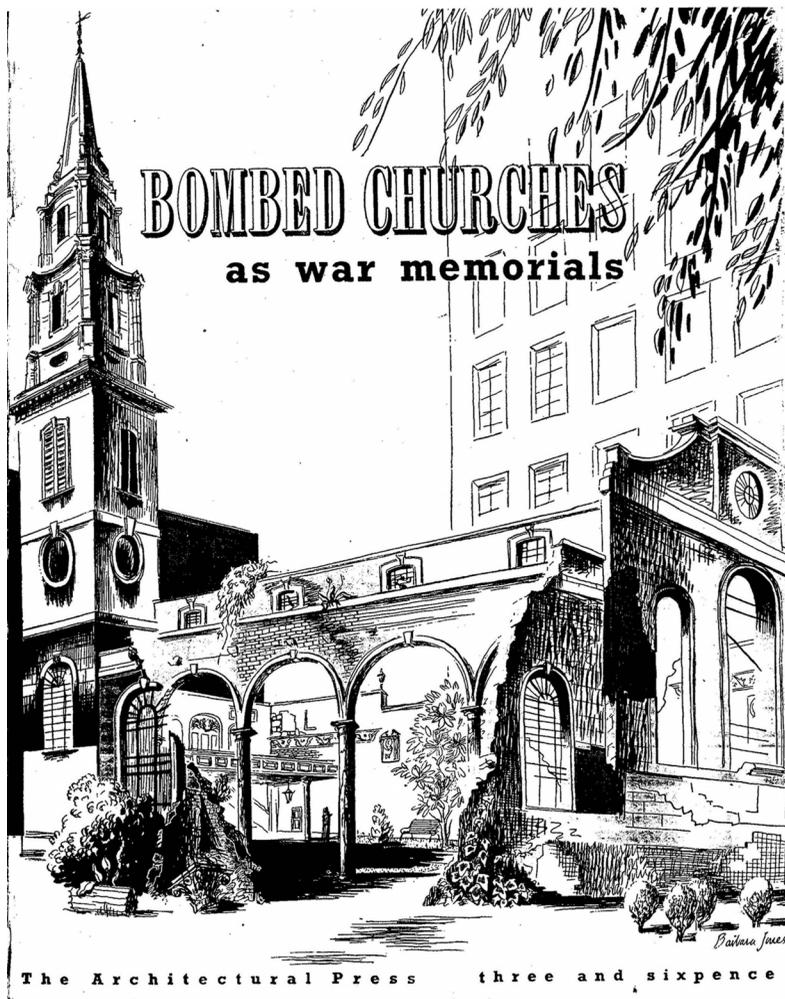


Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cot.2019.0004>

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## BOMBED CHURCHES, WAR MEMORIALS, AND THE CHANGING ENGLISH URBAN LANDSCAPE<sup>1</sup>

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Figure 1. Cover of *Bombed Churches as War Memorials*. (Architectural Press, 1945). (Peter J. Larkham)

Surprisingly common in UK cities bombed during World War II—perhaps less so in some other countries—are the ruins of bombed churches, empty sites, or markers indicating a church’s former presence in the city. There are also numerous restored or rebuilt churches with signs narrating their history of damage. This paper explores the nature and extent of such commemorations of destruction, particularly at a time when churchgoing was in sharp decline. Churches are, in many ways, “special buildings” in the physical and mental urban landscape: as landmarks for all if not as places of worship. The investment of past societies in such special buildings, their scale, position, and intricate detailing, as well as their cultural connections, all suggest why churches might become prominent and unforgettable memorials. But, three-quarters of a century after World War II, there is very limited evidence that the bombed churches remain effective or widely used as memorials. This paper uses examples from across England to explore why and how some bombed churches became war memorials and their transition over time from memorial to mere memento.

## Introduction

War memorials are produced through acts of new creation and by the destructive effects of war. This article examines how some churches, in their bombed and ruinous condition, came to be reused across England in the post-World War II period. The ways these buildings were treated throughout the war and the postwar reconstruction period represent a range of options for repurposing valued structures with varying degrees of damage and provide a useful snapshot of architectural and urban conservation theory and practices.<sup>2</sup>

In England, bombed churches form large-scale, prominent, and long-lasting urban landscape features. While some churches have been preserved in their ruinous state as markers of past wartime destruction, most have either been replaced with more generic memorials commemorating wartime loss and a vanished civic and architectural past, or they have been redeveloped. Documentation about the decision-making processes pertaining to the demolition, rebuilding, and memorializing of war-damaged churches is surprisingly scarce. Furthermore, what documentation does exist is scattered widely among offices and archives of central and local governments, churches, and voluntary organizations. This article addresses the questions of how and why bombed churches became memorials and investigates how they are used today. These churches were selected from the author’s long-term research and observations about postwar reconstruction in English cities, and the article extends an international literature on postwar reconstruction studies.<sup>3</sup>

Table 1: War-damaged churches in Europe

	England	Germany	France	Other Western	Poland	Other Eastern Europe
Retained as memorials	17	10	4		1	
Retained, no specific memorial function	8	2	5	5	11	6
Site remains, but little or no structure	4		1			
Total	29	12	10	5	12	6

The idea of using English World War II-era bombed churches as memorials began during the blitz and generated much public and professional debate (fig. 1). Despite these discussions, some remained as uninterpreted bomb sites for two or three more decades. Decision-making processes were slow, and funding was scarce. The significance of retaining and reusing war-damaged churches as memorials is demonstrated by the lack of such use for any other building type (only two other bombed buildings, in Bath and Hull, have been given state protection as scarce reminders of the war) and by the tendency to retain parts of redundant churches as monuments (for example in Canterbury, Salford, Upton-on-Severn, and Worcester). Many churches became available for alternative uses as a result of both large-scale outward migration of residents from city centers and a decline in church attendance from the mid-twentieth century.

Ongoing research in other European countries suggests that there is a higher density of bombed church remains in England, where the majority of badly damaged cities have retained at least one (table 1). Germany has prominent examples of ruin retention as memorials, including the Aegidienkirche in Hanover, the Kaiser Wilhelm Gedächtniskirche in Berlin and St. Nikolai Kirche in Hamburg. The facsimile reconstruction of the Frauenkirche, Dresden, has removed it from the category of “ruins” (but brings other problems of originality and authenticity).<sup>4</sup> In France the remains of Église Saint-Vincent, Rouen, is a reminder of that conflict, but the extent of church rebuilding across the country after 1945 has left few relics of World War II damage.<sup>5</sup>

The sites indicated (‡) in table 2 were subject to a systematic series of visits during 2003–4 by the author and J. L. Nasr, funded by the Leverhulme Trust. Additional visits by the author were made between 2010 and 2018. Visits occurred between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m., between April and October to study the nature and condition of the ruins, their position in the urban landscape, and public use of the sites as memorials. At most sites, few to no visitors were observed, including the City of London garden sites, even during fine-weather lunchtimes. Apart from homeless people, only one group of four visitors, an overseas family, was observed at St. Thomas, Birmingham. In Canterbury, young families appeared to prefer to use the tiny churchyard of St. Mary Magdalene rather than the surviving tower of bombed St. George, which is isolated in a sea of paving. Between 2010 and 2014, the author observed Charles Church, in Plymouth, at both early morning and

Table 2: Bomb-damaged church remains in England

Location (city)	Name	Nature of remnants	Official protection
Birmingham	St Thomas‡	W end and tower	Listed GII
Bristol	St Peter‡	Walls and tower	Listed GII*
	St Mary le Port	Tower	Listed GII
	Temple Church	Walls and tower	Listed GII*, scheduled monument
	St Andrew, Clifton	Lower courses of walls	Listed GII
Canterbury	St George‡	Tower	Listed GII
Coventry	Christ Church‡	Tower	Listed GII
	St Michael's Cathedral‡	Walls and tower	Listed GI
Dover	St James‡	walls	Listed GII, scheduled monument
Folkestone	Christ Church	Tower	Listed GII
Little Chart, Ashford	St Mary	Tower and some walls	Listed GII, scheduled monument
Liverpool	St Luke‡	Walls and tower	Listed GII*
London	St Alban‡	Tower	Listed GII*
	St Augustine‡	Tower (incorporated into choir school)	Listed GI
	Christ Church‡	Tower and some walls	Listed GI
	St Dunstan-in-the-East‡	Tower and some walls	Listed GI
	St John, Bermondsey	Lower courses of walls	
	St Mary Aldermanbury‡	Foundations only (remainder rebuilt in Fulton, Missouri)	Listed GII
	St George, Woolwich	Lower courses of walls	Listed GII
Norwich	St George-in-the-East‡	Lower courses of walls	Listed GI
	St Bartholomew, Heigham	Tower	Listed GII, scheduled monument
	St Benedict	Tower	Listed GI
Plymouth	Charles Church‡	Walls and tower	Listed GI
Portsmouth	Garrison Church‡	Nave remains gutted	Listed GII
Southampton	Holy Rood‡	Walls and tower	Listed GII*, scheduled monument
York	St Martin-le-Grand‡	Part remains unrestored	Listed GII*

Notes: "Listed" refers to state protection, graded I, II\*, or II according to degree of special architectural or historic interest. Scheduling as an Ancient Monument is also a statutory protection measure. The symbol ‡ identifies churches visited as part of this research.

evening. No visitors were seen, though two paused to read the related plaque on the adjoining pavement. The most-visited sites were those associated with public green space (St. Peter, Bristol) and those with still-functioning places of worship, principally Coventry Cathedral and St. Martin-le-Grand, York, both of which are promoted as sites of reconciliation.<sup>6</sup> Even Holy Rood, Southampton, on the town-center main street, which houses a merchant navy and *Titanic* memorial, had no visitors over the course of three observation visits. This apparent lack of attention to physically substantial memorials in the landscape raises concern about their efficacy as memorials now, seven decades after the events they were designed to commemorate.

## Memorials

The terms “monument” and “memorial” are often used interchangeably. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines “memorial” as “an object, often large and made of stone, that has been built to honour a famous person or event” or something “done to remember a person or people who have died.”<sup>7</sup> Writing on the language of war monuments, media and communication scholars Gill Abousnnouga and David Machin employ the same practical definition when referring to monuments.<sup>8</sup> The architect Theo Crosby suggests that the term “monument” can relate to scale, artistry, even vulgarity, but it is usually spectacular.<sup>9</sup> The urban designer Kim Dovey uses both “monument” and “memorial” to refer to the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial, Washington, DC, in consecutive sentences, and one could interpret “monument” as relating to the place and “memorial” to the names.<sup>10</sup> Pertaining more to preservation and especially to the English legal usage, G. Baldwin Brown discusses “monument” as including “all remains of bygone artistic periods” of all scales—they are monuments because they recall “the whole life with all its associations of some period or place.”<sup>11</sup> While Alois Riegl refers to “unintentional monuments” as representative of a stage of human development, this paper focuses on “intentional monuments” created out of war-damaged churches, intentionally commemorating a specific action.<sup>12</sup> Although the damage to these churches eliminated their function as sanctuaries, their monumentality of scale, according to Crosby’s definition, rendered them memorials.

Alan Borg, former director of both the Imperial War Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum, has noted that despite substantial survey work for the Imperial War Museum and other heritage organizations, England lacks a clear inventory regarding the number and types of war memorials both at home and abroad.<sup>13</sup> While the inventory of war memorials is unclear, the phenomenon has been studied in terms of their religious symbology, as gender-defining icons, as common cultural texts, and as totems of ritual practice in the construction of sacredness and community.<sup>14</sup> Semiotic studies have sought to unpack and interpret layers of meaning ascribed by those commissioning, creating, and using monuments.<sup>15</sup> How were concepts of building preservation applied to World War II-damaged churches in England, and how were preservation and reconstruction practices reflective of nostalgia and medievalism trends evident elsewhere in Europe?<sup>16</sup> These trends underpinned decision-making processes for postwar reconstruction, mediating the radical (e.g., developing anew rather than replicating destroyed structures) and *tabula rasa* (e.g., large-scale destruction of undamaged urban structures) approaches, leading to the creation and preservation of monumental post-World War II memorials.<sup>17</sup>

Numerous war memorials across England commemorate the dead of the First World War, almost all of whom died far from home. These memorials were still relatively recent at the close of World War II, and the names of those killed in the Second World War could be added to most. Unlike the World War I experience, the scale of home-front destruction and death caused during World War II was much greater, and the buildings, ruins, or spaces created out of devastation provided opportunities for new types of memorials that were more substantial than the plaques and crosses to dead combatants that had previously been dedicated.



Figure 2. St. Thomas, Birmingham, a monumental ruin now part of a “peace garden.” (Peter J. Larkham)

The concept and design of memorials honoring World War II differed from those dedicated to World War I. In 1947, R. A. Cordingley, an eminent academic architect, voiced a popularly held view that monumental war memorials were not in favor and that most people believed “memorials should have a practical, social end.”<sup>18</sup> In Birmingham, where a Hall of Memory was built in the early 1920s, by 1947 the local War Memorial Committee asserted that there was “general agreement that any War Memorial should not take the form of the customary stone monument, but should provide something of use and lasting benefit to all sections of the community.”<sup>19</sup> This view appears to have informed the decision to retain the tower of St. Thomas and to repurpose its churchyard as a public garden (fig. 2).

In contrast to Cordingley, Stanley Adshead, an eminent architect/planner and author of reconstruction plans for several towns, wrote during World War II that “monumental memorials may be described as the jewels of a monumental town plan.”<sup>20</sup> Adshead appears

to have been referring to plans such as the 1943 J. Paton Watson and Patrick Abercrombie plan for Plymouth, which was monumental in scale and formal in layout and which retained one ruined church. Coventry Cathedral provides another example of creating memorials out of monumental ruins whereby the vestiges—in fact these were often very substantial remains—of towers, spires, and structural walls were made integral parts of memorial sites. Most reconstruction plan authors were established professionals and academics trained in the Beaux-Arts tradition, many at the Liverpool School of Architecture. Their designs, although rarely implemented, were characterized by a formal monumentality and geometrical symmetry.<sup>21</sup> Today, many of these memorial sites are recognized as national heritage and benefit from statutory protection (table 2). Their designations, however, are associated with their exceptional architectural value rather than their monumental stature.

### Churches as “Special” Buildings

In exploring the physical and social impact of war, social, cultural, and urban historians have often focused on the destruction or survival of special buildings.<sup>22</sup> The designation “special” is derived from Italian architectural typology and denotes a range of building types and forms distinct from the ordinary, or “basic,” buildings such as houses.<sup>23</sup> Special buildings often survived or received the most resources for their repair or rehabilitation during periods of postwar urban reconstruction because of the societal value attached to them. Their survival was further enhanced by what was typically a more robust construction than seen in vernacular or everyday buildings.<sup>24</sup> During World War II, special buildings (i.e., those with exceptional architectural and historical although not social or cultural merit) were conferred protective status, and Allied troops were ordered, as far as possible, to preserve them.<sup>25</sup>

The preeminence of the church in daily life has dwindled, leaving many churches without sufficient congregations to care for their physical maintenance. Although diminished in their psychological and social importance, these structures remain symbolic fixtures in the urban landscape.<sup>26</sup> Even when they no longer fulfill their original function, churches today retain a persistent societal appeal, which cultural geographer Veronica della Dora has referred to as a “collective religious subconsciousness” underpinning “contemporary Western European societies.”<sup>27</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, there was a general reluctance to demolish churches if another was not to be rebuilt on the site; however, redundant churches (or parts thereof) could be moved.<sup>28</sup> Notwithstanding a postwar transition to a more secular society, church buildings are powerful reminders of the values of the societies that created them; as Chambers states, they are “symbolic markers of a spiritual landscape and banal backdrop to a dialectic of remembrance and forgetting.”<sup>29</sup>

### War Damage

World War II has been called a “total war,” one where the civilian population was affected directly and substantially by the conduct and effects of the war. Wartime destruction in

England was unevenly distributed. The numbers, types, and spatial distribution of structures that survived the war, particularly aerial bombardment, varied greatly. While churches held a special significance for their communities, not all churches were conferred special protective status, and many, particularly those in densely populated historic areas, were hard hit. In Coventry, after the main raid in November 1940, damage was widespread, affecting virtually every structure within the city center. Only 9 of the 30 churches, excluding the cathedral, remained undamaged after this single raid.<sup>30</sup> During the entirety of World War II, 624 of the 701 churches of the Diocese of London were damaged, of which 91 were completely destroyed. Fifty were to be completely rebuilt and 494 repaired.<sup>31</sup> By mid-1944, nationally, “nearly 14,000 churches, monasteries, convents and other ecclesiastical buildings ha[d] suffered various degrees of damage.”<sup>32</sup>

More than seventy years later, it is extremely difficult to judge the actual severity of bomb damage. Even at the time of the bombing, the tendency to overestimate the extent of damage was acknowledged. The Church of England noted that “it must . . . be remembered that many reports of damage to churches prove . . . to amount only to stripped tiles or slates, or the loss of valueless stained glass.”<sup>33</sup> Photographic documentation of the damage is rare, as photography required official permits, scarce materials, and approval by government censors.<sup>34</sup> Although literature of the postwar era and local and architectural histories of the recent past have characterized buildings and sites as “totally destroyed,” the degree of damage varied. Although incendiaries burned the roofs and interior fittings of many buildings, walls and towers survived with little damage (fig. 3). Two different examples of the contradiction in description and reality are St. Alban on Wood Street, London, and St. Martin at Oak, Norwich. In the former instance, the caption to one of a series of contemporary sketches of damaged London churches described St. Alban: “The whole of [it], except for the tower, was destroyed by a bomb.” The accompanying sketch, however, clearly shows considerable survival of the walls up to the parapet.<sup>35</sup> In the latter instance, the Norfolk Churches website notes that St. Martin at Oak was “destroyed by bombing” despite the fact that it was listed grade I in 1954 and the church’s official description makes no mention of war damage.<sup>36</sup> There appears to be clear propaganda rationale in some uses of texts and images in the service of nationalism and morale building especially, but not solely, in official publications.<sup>37</sup> This is shown by the role of the Ministry of Information in sanctioning rationed paper and ink for publishing books on bomb damage, and in the role of images of the immediate aftermath of bombing in the creation of “the myth of the blitz.”<sup>38</sup>

Despite descriptions of “totally destroyed” churches, it is clear from contemporary illustrations that although many sustained damage, substantial remains survived. This level of survival can be partially attributed to the quality and robust construction often reserved for churches. Fire spared stout, stone walls that could be refaced. Roofs could be replaced and interiors reinstated. The treatment of church remnants in postwar reconstruction plans varied significantly. Examples range from the retention of all surviving fabric to the retention of an isolated tower marooned on a traffic roundabout.

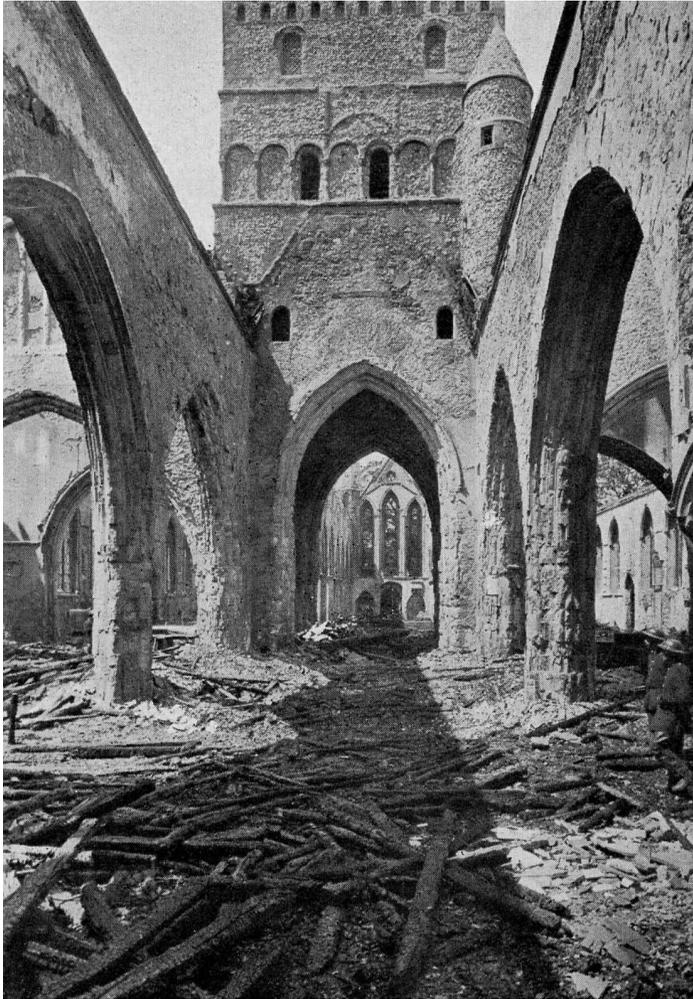


Figure 3. The church as ruin: St. Nicholas, Great Yarmouth, June 1942. Burned out but stonework remaining: totally restored by 1961. (Photographer unknown, reproduced in Charles Box, *Great Yarmouth: Front Line Town 1939-45* [n.p.: n.d., c.1945])

## Ruins

At the heart of this review is the social perception of ruins in postwar England. Art historian Mark Pohlard has described the English relationship to ruins as “innate” to “the English aesthetic sense,” a sensibility derived from the aesthetic movement of the Picturesque whereby deteriorated castles and city walls serve as memento mori and suggest historic and lost grandeur.<sup>39</sup> By 1882 ruins had become candidates for state protection as “scheduled ancient monuments.”<sup>40</sup> Despite the English fascination for ruins, the effects of war altered the perspectives of more than a few people. In a 1944 letter to the editors of *Country Life*, one reader wrote, “A state of ruin is in itself no bar to a beautiful existence.”<sup>41</sup> In the same year, the architect Hugh Casson suggested that ruins, particularly when produced through the action of war, served as powerful symbols evocative of lost places, people, or communal life. Casson wrote, “Even though a ruin to-day is as common a feature

of the street scene as a pillar-box, it still has this power to stir the heart. Even though we live and work among ruins, they still possess the beauty of strangeness.”<sup>42</sup> Rose Macauley began her well-known postwar book *The Pleasure of Ruins* with, “To be fascinated by ruins has always, it would seem, been a human tendency.”<sup>43</sup> A similar sentiment permeates the art historian and museum curator Christopher Woodward’s more recent volume and cultural geographer J. B. Jackson’s exploration of “the necessity for ruins,” which refers to both monuments and memorials particularly in the US context.<sup>44</sup>

Scholars such as Mark Pohl and Neil Matheson have examined how ruins, particularly of postwar London, were conceptualized and represented in propagandist photography.<sup>45</sup> Others, including Tanya Whitehouse and Jonathan Hill, have explored how ruins acquire aesthetic value through the lens of “ruin porn.”<sup>46</sup> Geographers John Tunbridge and Greg Ashworth have discussed the concept of “dissonant heritage,” wherein the symbolism of and memories evoked by ruins constitute a complex and contradictory meaning.<sup>47</sup> This study continues in this vein by examining how particular ruins, created by enemy action during World War II, were subsequently managed, cleared, or rebuilt.

### Responses to Church Bombing

By August 1942, the Ministry of Works and Planning had become so concerned about the issue of bombed churches, particularly in London, that two officers produced a *Memorandum on the Preservation and Maintenance of Ancient Churches*, which was widely circulated within the ministry. Among the document’s recommendations: “Where towers and steeples are preserved, the rest of the site should be kept as open space and the remains of the church laid out as an Ancient Monument.”<sup>48</sup> This policy was not implemented, and there are no records of its reception in the higher echelons of the ministry. The Association of the Friends of the City Churches (i.e., the City of London) published a statement of policy in late 1943, which included the aspiration that if full reconstruction is impossible, “the tower, together with any spire or steeple that may have been destroyed, should be restored and preserved, and the site of the church, together with the churchyard, kept as an open space in perpetuity.”<sup>49</sup> The art historian Nikolaus Pevsner noted in a 1946 radio broadcast that churches not rebuilt or replaced by ecclesiastical buildings such as parish halls “would be the ideal memorials of this war.”<sup>50</sup> The Church of England was an early participant in the widespread and heated debate on World War II memorials. This was unsurprising given that so many World War I memorials were within churches or churchyards and had explicitly Christian symbolism.<sup>51</sup> Churches have long been sites of memorialization and physical expressions of concepts of society, space, and place.<sup>52</sup> This early agreement that parts of bombed churches should be retained, and spaces kept for public use, emphasizes their memorial function.

The idea that bombed churches might be retained as ruins and used as public open spaces, gardens, and war memorials was promoted immediately after the main blitz of 1940–41. Converting bombed sites to memorials was a relatively quick and inexpensive solution (if site value was disregarded) to fulfilling the desire for memorials and the need for public open spaces. As many bombed churches were transferred to other ownership, it

also contributed to solving the Church of England's problem of redundant churches resulting from dwindling congregations. In 1941, John Summerson, an architectural historian and one of the founders of the National Buildings Record, suggested that some churches could remain ruinous: "If it is not wanted as a place of worship why not let it remain as a shell, a witness—and a beautiful one—of the acts of these times as well as of its own."<sup>53</sup> The reconstruction planners J. Paton Watson and Patrick Abercrombie suggested that the ruined Charles Church in Plymouth should be retained as a ruin, integrated within their monumental city-center plan as "a fitting memorial to symbolize the city's grief and honour in the triumphant survival of the trials of this tragic war."<sup>54</sup>

The idea of retaining ruins was popularized again, for an architectural readership, through a well-illustrated feature in the *Architectural Review* in 1944. Later that year the *Times* carried a letter signed by a range of influential artistic and intellectual figures, including Kenneth Clark, T. S. Eliot, H. S. Goodhart-Rendel, Julian Huxley, and Lord Keynes, which stated that selected ruins should receive only the barest minimum of stabilization; that they should be "surrounded by lawns, flower-beds and flowering trees"; and that they should provide for the public's "spiritual refreshment and physical and mental relaxation."<sup>55</sup> The rationale for selecting some of the worst-damaged churches was that

the time will come—much sooner than most of us to-day can visualize—when no trace of death from the air will be left in the streets of rebuilt London. At such a time the story of the blitz may begin to seem unreal not only to visiting tourists but to a new generation of Londoners. It is the purpose of war memorials to remind posterity of the reality of the sacrifices upon which its apparent security has been built. These church ruins, we suggest, would do this with realism and gravity.<sup>56</sup>

In an editorial reaction to the *Times* letter, the *Architect and Building News* was more interested in the absence of explicit acknowledgement "that there might be new churches on the sites; only restoration is mentioned. And it is difficult to see why a contemporary piece of work should not also provide a most suitable and significant war memorial."<sup>57</sup> But at the time, this was a minority view. The dominant view remained in favor of reconstruction or ruin retention, not demolition or contemporary construction.

The War Memorials Advisory Council sought "to guide public opinion" about improving the quality of war memorial design, and as part of this initiative a committee of the Royal Society of Arts also suggested that bombed churches could be preserved in garden settings as war memorials.<sup>58</sup> The anonymous propagandist booklet *Resurgam* suggested, under the heading "The Charm of Ruins: A Suggestion for Perpetuation," that those of Christopher Wren's damaged London churches not rebuilt because of the falling population—and other historic buildings elsewhere—"might be left as ruins . . . these perpetual ruins would serve as monuments to 'Britain's finest hour.'"<sup>59</sup> The idea that ruins could have "charm" builds upon Clark's comment about the Picturesque and is a precursor of Macauley's exploration of the "pleasure" of ruins.

In 1945, a slim book titled *Bombed Churches as War Memorials* popularized the idea

that bombed church ruins should be retained in garden settings and with a memorial function (fig. 1).<sup>60</sup> The argument built upon the 1944 *Architectural Review* feature, using many of the same illustrations. Hugh Casson provided the introduction, and the book contained detailed and illustrated proposals for five churches. Casson argued strongly, but largely unsuccessfully, against the purely functional and financial arguments of the Bishop's Commission, which was deliberating at this time, that these churches had largely lost their congregations, and their valuable sites would raise money needed by the Diocese of London elsewhere.

The retention of ruins raises the much-discussed dilemma of restoration versus reproduction, a negotiation that pivots on the issues of original fabric and authenticity. Such quandaries come to the fore during moments of reconstruction following a disaster.<sup>61</sup> Casson asked, although technically feasible, "would not such rebuilt churches be just lifeless reproductions, as smug and accurate and boring as plaster casts in a museum?" Retention as ruins therefore "does not seem quite so fanciful after all."<sup>62</sup> However, he argued that even such ruins would have multiple functions and listed three: as "sanctuaries" and places of worship; as open spaces, "affording places of relaxation and retreat from the bustle of traffic"; and as war memorials.<sup>63</sup> Specifically, Casson wrote:

If ruins are to be preserved for use and not merely for looks, they must not be left, as the romantic purists would leave them, to crumble into dust. A ruin is more than a collection of debris. It is a place of its own individuality, charged with its own emotion and atmosphere, of drama, of grandeur, of nobility, or of charm. These qualities must be preserved as carefully as the broken stones which are their physical embodiment.<sup>64</sup>

Here, Casson is responding to contemporary treatments of ruins, especially those in the custody of the Ministry of Works, a treatment that, by today's aesthetic standards, would be deemed sanitized and manicured.<sup>65</sup> He is also criticizing Kenneth Clarke and others who suggested that the bomb-damaged urban landscapes were in some way "Picturesque."

An example of a ruined church preserved within a garden setting is St. Thomas Church in Birmingham. Bombed in 1940–41, the ruins were represented as a memorial in 1955 as part of a joint war and coronation commemoration, with the churchyard as a garden. City and diocesan archives contain records outlining years of negotiation over the practicalities and funding that involved the central government.<sup>66</sup> Pevsner describes the garden layout: "It would be hard to think of anything more pathetic. . . . [T]his is an area which desperately needs imaginative treatment."<sup>67</sup> St. Thomas's gardens were redesigned in the late 1980s as a "peace garden," incorporating part of a World War I memorial relocated from the civic center district (fig. 2). The site suffers from limited accessibility. It is isolated from the city core by distance, the barrier of the postwar Inner Ring Road, and a lack of signage.

The ruined Charles Church (1657) in Plymouth, in which open-air services were held during wartime but which the church did not wish to restore, was purchased by Plymouth



Figure 4. Charles Church, Plymouth, burned out but with most stonework surviving, now isolated on a busy traffic roundabout. (Peter J. Larkham)

Corporation in 1957 to be preserved as a “memorial to all the civilian population of Plymouth who lost their lives due to enemy air attacks.”<sup>68</sup> The ruin now stands on a new island site at the eastern end of Royal Parade. The 1943 civic reconstruction plan had routed the road to the north of the ruin. Now, more a glorified traffic island than a garden ruin, the church and its yard are nevertheless more visible as a monument than is Birmingham’s St. Thomas (fig. 4). Its location on a busy traffic roundabout, however, poses pedestrian accessibility problems.

Although several of London’s bombed churches were eventually turned into gardens an explicit memorial function is less evident, and the garden formation was much later. Christ Church, Newgate Street, survived the Bishop’s Commission proposal for conversion to an institute, and the shell was restored in 1960. The east end, however, was partially demolished in 1974. As Amery wrote in *Wren’s London*, “The present City Corporation demonstrated their love of Wren by demolishing walls that had survived the Blitz for road widening.”<sup>69</sup> A garden was laid out in 1989 (fig. 5). St. Dunstan-in-the-East, of which the Bishop’s Commission stated that “the arcades and exterior walls [were] largely destroyed,”<sup>70</sup> still remains in a garden laid out by the Architect’s Department of the Corporation of London in 1967–71. St. Mary Aldermanbury is a special case, as it is the only bombed church to have been physically moved. Unlike other church memorials, it is a memorial to one individual, rather than to the war dead. Though other remnants of the



Figure 5. Christ Church, London, after bombing, road widening, and belated garden creation. (Peter J. Larkham)

church were sold and rebuilt at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, in 1964–69, the site, with vestiges of the building’s lowest courses remaining, survives. Plaques placed at the London site acknowledge the relocation of materials to Fulton, which were repurposed to create a memorial to Winston Churchill.

Some other churches have been retained as memorials without gardens. Coventry Cathedral is one that is well known internationally as a site of peace and reconciliation. The words “Father forgive” are carved into the stonework of the apse and, despite early doubts about retaining the ruin, the ruined church acts as an outdoor space for the new modernist cathedral.<sup>71</sup> In contrast, St. James, a small church in Dover, is an interesting example of decades-long neglect of a restorable building. Dover was badly damaged by cross-Channel shelling in 1940–44, and the church suffered some damage but, in an early postwar Ministry of Works photograph, appears essentially complete. In 1948, a council official suggested the church be preserved as a “tidy ruin, to commemorate the suffering of the people of Dover throughout the war.”<sup>72</sup> Council minutes of February 9, 1948, mention that the church authorities had offered the council the opportunity to acquire the site by compulsory purchase, in which case the church would not seek compensation, provided that the site would be used for a memorial (war memorial was unspecified but strongly implied).<sup>73</sup> The council agreed to purchase the site in the early 1950s, but little else was done until the churchyard burials were exhumed in 1973 and the site was turned

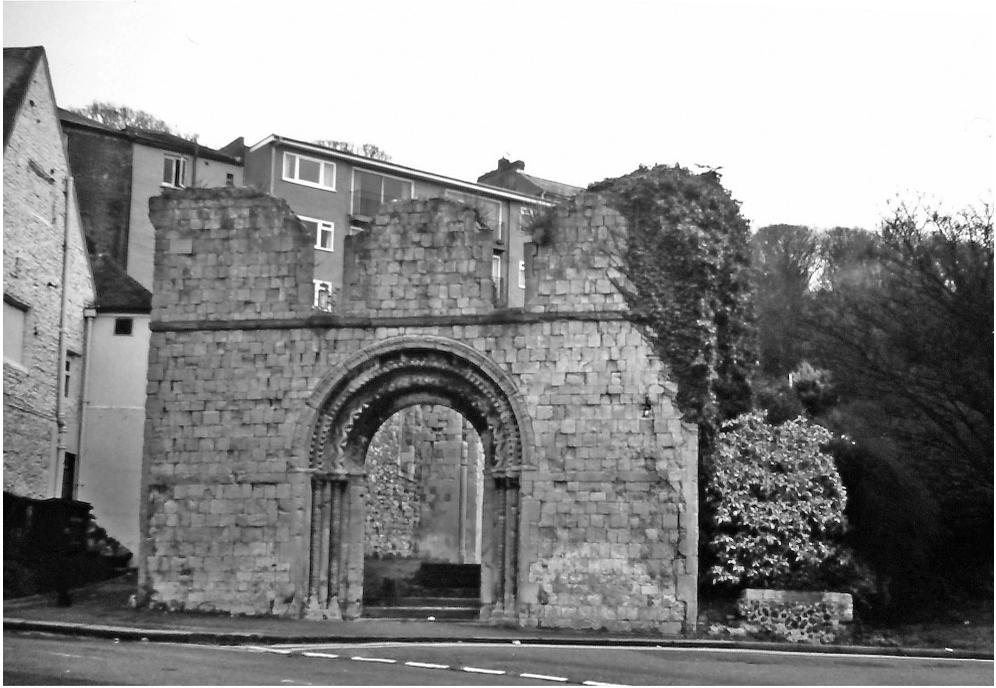


Figure 6. St. James, Dover: overgrown site, leisure center, and car park, *right*. (Peter J. Larkham)

into a memorial. Much of the churchyard was allocated to become a car park and municipal swimming pool. Today, a plaque on site gives prominence to the church's lengthy history rather than its function as a war memorial, which, as the documentation shows, was the express intention of both the town council and the church authorities (fig. 6).

In other instances, church ruins were preserved or repurposed with little explicit mention of the bombing. The tower of St. Alban, Wood Street, London, is an example.<sup>74</sup> Although the interior was gutted, both the tower and walls survived the bombing. The Bishop's Commission recommended that the tower "might be taken down and rebuilt as part of a new suburban church."<sup>75</sup> The rest of the church was demolished in 1955 for road widening, despite the fact that it had previously been stabilized. Road design proposals had varied from retaining the tower, moving the tower, or demolishing it along with the remainder of the church.<sup>76</sup> The tower remained ruinous on a small traffic island until restored in 1964. It was later converted for business and residential use by Frederick Burn, Smith and Partners in 1984.<sup>77</sup>

Although large-scale ruins are the most visually dramatic, most church memorials were created out of small features and plaques. Interpretive memorial plaques typically mention the bombing and subsequent treatment of the site (fig. 7). In one such example, a plaque at the church of St. Anne and St. Agnes, London, reads simply that "the church suffered badly in the Second World War but was restored between 1963–1968, being re-hallowed on 23rd April 1966." At St. Bride's on Fleet Street, one plaque mentions the bombing, which badly damaged the church, only to raise the topic of crypts that were



Figure 7. St. Lawrence, Exeter, church bombed and demolished, a plaque being the only physical reminder. (Peter J. Larkham)

discovered at the site. Other plaques at St. Bride's commemorate the people involved in the restoration. St. Anne and St. Agnes, as well as St. Bride's churches suggest that the severity of bomb damage and the nature of restoration is rarely made explicit in such memorial markers.

Another form of commemoration of damaged or destroyed churches was the reuse of salvaged fixtures, materials, and furnishings in new buildings. In Christ Church, Meaford, Ontario, there is a war memorial that consists of several windows assembled from fragments from one hundred bomb-damaged churches and nine cathedrals, including one window entirely of glass from Wren's London churches.<sup>78</sup> Sometimes the damage itself is the memorial, as where the shrapnel scars on several London churches have been left, including St. Clement Danes (fig. 8). A deliberate decision was made in the 2000s refurbishment of St. Paul's Cathedral to retain such scars, as also happened elsewhere, including in the surviving apse of Coventry Cathedral.<sup>79</sup>

### Layers of Meaning

All memorials are products of complex decision-making processes, but memorializing the contested and dissonant heritage of war and destruction is particularly difficult. This is seen in the examples discussed in this paper, particularly in the interplay between the Church of England, whose power and influence in society was waning but still substantial, and local governments (city councils). Whereas the Church of England owned the properties, government officials were beholden to their constituencies, who, in the aftermath of the war, petitioned for the creation of memorials. Local memorials such as at St. Peter,



Figure 8. St. Clement Danes, London: shrapnel damage and memorial plaque. (Peter J. Larkham)

Bristol, St. Luke, Liverpool, or St. James, Dover, all emphasized local, communal losses over celebrations of victory or war. While local in scale and focus, congregations belonging to the Church of England necessarily negotiated memorial decisions with the church as a primary stakeholder. Memorialization is an essentially political process.<sup>80</sup> However, as the historian Bill Niven notes, “Many memorials have undergone rededication, alteration, removal and reconstruction, and relocation during their history. This makes them significant as markers of political and cultural change.”<sup>81</sup> When the local community changes, so too does the meaning of the memorial. As those directly involved age and die, significance may be forgotten.<sup>82</sup>

### **Changing Meaning—From Memorial to Memento**

Are visitation numbers indicative of a memorial’s success? Are the relatively low visitation numbers at church memorial sites indicative of a shift in their social relevance? The answer

may be yes. A 1944 editorial in the *Architect and Building News* stated presciently, “There may . . . be disillusion in the ultimate reaction of the public to the memorials created by the treatment of sites and ruins. Almost certainly the origin of the idea will be fairly soon forgotten, though appreciation of the amenity offered will remain.”<sup>83</sup> If the meaning of memorials changes over time, it may be possible to explore their success or otherwise as memorials.

Use and meaning are certainly changing. St. Thomas, Birmingham, has been repurposed and its surroundings redesigned from a coronation garden to a peace garden, a generic rather than specifically local commemorative role. Its out-of-center location and lack of signage contribute to its infrequent visitation. In contrast, Temple Church, Bristol, was used for a performance/art installation by the US artist Theaster Gates in 2015.<sup>84</sup> St. Luke, Liverpool, purchased by the city council for use as memorial in 1968, was repaired in 2015–17, and attention was paid to restoring the world’s first metal bell frame, which survived the fire: it has some specialist appeal to campanologists. Since 2007, St. Luke has operated as an arts venue, with a full program of installations, exhibitions, and events.<sup>85</sup> In these instances, even though a memorial function exists, it is the new activities that have begun to draw new audiences.

Visibility and accessibility—closely related—and interpretation also contribute to the relative success of sites, as the social scientists Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz discuss in relation to the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial.<sup>86</sup> Visibility alone does not ensure success, as is evident at Charles Church, Plymouth, which is visible but is difficult to access, marooned on a traffic island in a busy multilane highway, and interpreted only by a plaque on the neighboring pedestrian footpath. In Bristol, although St. Peter is very visible in a public green space—also site of the castle—and well used during fine-weather lunch hours, two other bombed churches within a few hundred yards are closely wrapped around by postwar office developments and are little used, even by the office occupants. Again, interpretation is by plaque. In contrast, the tower of St. George in Canterbury is quite visible and accessible, surrounded by a paved retail area, but passers-by do not seem to interact with it, and there is little scope for quiet contemplation. Interpretation here was absent at the time of research visits.

In terms of visitation numbers, damaged churches that retained some religious function in addition to their memorial function appeared to be most successful. Two examples are Coventry cathedral, which has a small museum adjacent to the new cathedral, and St. Martin-le-Grand, York. Both have explicit and widely promoted “reconciliation” missions, focusing on “healing the wounds of history.” Several other ruined churches such as St. Luke, Liverpool, host occasional religious services such as weddings or at key dates such as Easter. But most do not, and their memorial function—like much of today’s society around them—seems to have become secularized.

If the original designs and Christian-dominated war memorial function is changing, and in some cases the memorials are little used and apparently ineffective, is it now possible to think of them as mere “mementos,” a concept that may be a memory trigger but

that usually implies something small in scale or importance? Are they becoming a less significant element in our rapidly changing societies and urban landscapes?

## Conclusions

The concept of “memorial” is problematic as a descriptor of the variety of ways church vestiges have been dealt with after World War II in England. This includes the concept of repurposing ruined churches as memorials, the selection and management processes, and the way they are used today. As societal relationships to these church war memorial sites change and as war-era survivors die, the number of site visitors dwindles. Despite the agitation in the professional and lay press in the late 1940s, only a few were retained as gardens/memorials, and these were often created belatedly, decades after the war and with seemingly more attention paid to the need for public green space than to any specific memorial function. There is an additional practical problem of maintenance costs for such large-scale sites and structures, especially for those without income-earning potential or direct community benefit, for example, as the site of commemoration events. We are caring for “dead architecture”—structures with no apparent function, no economic or social benefit, but with upkeep requirements.<sup>87</sup> In times of economic downturn, strict financial regulation for charitable organizations, and limited resources, owners and decision makers are increasingly pressured to repurpose or dispose of these sites and structures. This raises questions of sustained relevance. Are these memorials losing their social relevance/significance and if so, should we be prepared to let them go?

There is a wide range of differences between a site on the scale of, and with the continuing religious and memorial use of the Kaiser Wilhelm Gedächtniskirche or Coventry Cathedral and the reused and splendidly isolated tower of St. Alban, Wood Street, London, which has neither religious function nor explicit on-site memorial interpretation. While the former two examples clearly qualify intentionally and functionally, and successfully, as memorials, the concept of “memento” now seems more appropriate for the latter.

Moreover, although this paper discusses specific examples of the impact of war on the physical fabric and function of churches, this consideration could equally be extended to the fate of high-profile cultural structures and other special buildings. Building types such as the City of London’s medieval guild halls, town halls across the country, or even that focus of community life and identity, the public house—which became a significant aspect of concern in postwar reconstruction—can be considered in the same way. A bombed cinema in Hull, listed for its rarity as a surviving bomb site, is about to be converted to a civilian war memorial, and a bombed but patched-up and now listed municipal office in Bath has retained its scars in a major rebuilding.<sup>88</sup> We are clearly rethinking what constitutes a war memorial.

Official English Heritage conservation policy states, “The response to dramatic contemporary events which may ultimately come to be seen as historically significant—to memorialise, rebuild or redevelop—tends to be driven by public debate.”<sup>89</sup> While, in many cases, public debate is a significant factor in decision making, English Heritage suggests that the solutions of the immediate postwar period are no longer suitable: “Retaining

guttled shells as monuments is not likely, in most cases, to be an effective means of conserving the surviving fabric, especially internal fabric never designed to withstand weathering.<sup>90</sup> Yet, this is what was done with the bombed church monuments discussed in this paper. Even roofing a ruin is no real solution: St. George’s Garrison Church, Woolwich, London, has had two temporary roofs since 1945 but remains officially classified as a “building at risk” of continued decay.<sup>91</sup> The discussion of the monuments, memorials, and mementos, however, shows that, in some instances, meaning—and even uses—change over time. Monuments of the mid-twentieth century may become less relevant now, and decision makers need to understand wider patterns of changing values and attitudes, especially toward remembering and forgetting. Changing values and attitudes are even more significant for less “special” buildings—as is apparent from the ever-shifting fate of the vestiges of the postwar reconstruction process, which are now fast disappearing.

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