

# An architect's view

Architect and former CCT Trustee, *Richard Griffiths*, looks back at how historic churches have been transformed by innovative architecture using examples from his new book *Old Buildings, New Architecture*

I specialise as an architect in working with historic buildings, and have always loved visiting historic churches. I became a Trustee of the Churches Conservation Trust at a formative time in 2000 when CCT was moving from being a preservation body to a conservation body, grappling with the needs of visitors, of access and of sustainability. I am fortunate to have been able to use

the experience gained at CCT on later projects with high national profiles, including The Cathedral & Abbey Church of Saint Albans, Kenilworth Castle and St Pancras Hotel.

I have come to realise that the task of adapting historic buildings and historic churches to face the future offers a triple challenge.

The first is a technical challenge, to repair and conserve the historic fabric, and to make alterations in a sound and enduring manner. The second is a functional challenge, to equip them to accommodate new uses. However, there is a third

“the task of adapting historic buildings and historic churches to face the future offers a triple challenge...”



**Above**  
The spectacular angel roof ceiling at St Nicholas' Chapel, King's Lynn, Norfolk (Charlie Marshall and RGA)

**Left**  
Richard Griffiths MA (Cantab) Dip Arch Grad Dipl Cons (AA) RIBA AABC, Founder of Richard Griffiths Architects (RGA)

challenge: to do so in a manner that adds a new layer of architectural integrity and beauty to all the historic layers that are already present. This triple challenge relates back to the ancient Roman architect Vitruvius' account of architecture as 'commodity, firmness and delight'.

### St Paul's, Bristol

While I was a Trustee, CCT acquired the fine but derelict Georgian church of St Paul's in the then notorious St Paul's area of Bristol. I feel a sense of

vicarious involvement since I recommended the contact who identified Circomedia, a circus training school, as the ideal tenant. An aerial rig has been hung from the roof structure via small holes drilled in the elaborate plaster ceiling, from which aerial acrobatics can be carried out in a blissful counterpoint to the architecture.

**St Luke's, Kentish Town, London**  
St Luke's came to CCT having been abandoned by the parish because of its structural failings and its disastrous water





Left  
St Luke's Church,  
Kentish Town, London  
(RGA)

penetration. To prevent the west wall falling outwards, we tied the arcade by drilling and inserting stainless steel bars through the whole length of the nave. We also redesigned the eaves by extending the roof tiling over the exposed and leaking wall head, with new external cast iron gutters and downpipes. These make an attractive addition to the external appearance of the church. St Luke's reopened as a parish church in 2011, a rare example of a CCT church returning to parish use.

#### St Nicholas' Chapel, King's Lynn, Norfolk

Our most notable project for CCT was the HLF-funded project at St Nicholas' Chapel, King's Lynn – a magnificent 15th-century masterpiece. We had to replace the lead roof, repair the fabric and provide facilities for other uses, notably large

concerts as part of the King's Lynn Festival. To this end we added toilets and a kitchen into the constricted space of the tower. However, the most notable aspect of our work was the novel approach to heating. We installed electric radiant heaters in the nave, fitted to the existing 'lobster pot' chandeliers and powered by an array of photo-voltaic panels covering the complete length of the nave. The project has reinstated the church at the centre of the life of King's Lynn, and is now a CCT flagship of sustainability. 🏡

### OLD BUILDINGS, NEW ARCHITECTURE

Richard's book, *Old Buildings, New Architecture*, contains descriptions of his award-winning work at Southwark Cathedral, St Albans Abbey and other churches. As well as at historic houses and in the regeneration of historic areas, most notably at the St Pancras Hotel. The book can be purchased at a reduced price of £30 (post-free) at [rgarchitects.com](http://rgarchitects.com).