

# Working Safely at Height in Churches



**Ian Simpson**

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*Front Cover: Spire finial at St. Cuthbert, Halsall, following the completion of repair works in 2016. This is 39m above the West Lancashire plain.*

*Above: The bellcote, turret and ridge at St. Dunstan, Edge Hill, Liverpool, taken from the working platform during works to clean out guano and affix pigeon netting in May 2013.*

*All photographs by the Author, except p.3 – Joel Wilson / Church of England Birmingham; p.12, p.14(top) – Aerial Video TV; p.14 (bottom) – Dave Graham.*

## Introduction

As an Incumbent, Churchwarden or Building Manager one of your key duties is to make sure that everyone who carries out work in your Church – whether or not they are paid for it – does so safely. This guide is part of a series which aims to make it easier for you to do this.

Falls from height can have devastating consequences, such as serious injury, permanent disability and death. In fact, falls from height are the most common class of workplace injury and therefore the focus of a major campaign by the Health & Safety Executive (HSE). This leaflet gives

- advice on avoiding working at height
- advice on working safely at height where it cannot be avoided.

This guide is not a statement of the law but is intended to give you good general guidance. We will notify you of any significant changes to the law or regulations on the website and via our diocesan email bulletin.

If you are unsure have any questions or need further advice then please do not hesitate to contact the author:

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#### **About the Author**

Ian Simpson has been Church of England Birmingham's Historic Places of Worship Support Officer since July 2019 when he moved to the city from Liverpool where he had been Diocesan Heritage & Technical Officer for six years. Ian has two decades' experience in the care, maintenance and repair of buildings, specialising in historic buildings, and holds an MBA in Facilities Management. He is Vice Chairman of the Churches Visitor & Tourism Association.

# Top Tips

## Do

- avoid working at height wherever possible, for instance by using extensible brushes for cleaning.
- make sure everyone who needs to work at height knows how to do so safely.
- visually check a ladder or stepladder for safety before attempting to use it.
- ensure all ladders and steps are checked for safety by a Competent Person at least every year.
- Take care when using ladders or steps to site them on a hard, level surface away from doors or windows.
- make sure that nobody can climb on any fixed ladders or scaffolding in or around the church.

## Do not

- lean over balconies when carrying out maintenance or cleaning tasks.
- stand on chairs or tables.
- over-reach whilst working from a ladder or stepladder.
- risk using a ladder or stepladder if you are not sure it's safe. If it doesn't look safe, it probably isn't.

## Working At Height

### What it is, and why it matters

Ask several people what is meant by “working at height” and you will likely get several definitions. “Above 6ft”, “over 9ft” and “above two metres” are common. In fact, the Health & Safety Executive defines working at height as:

**work in any place, including at or below ground level (for example in underground workings), where a person could fall a distance liable to cause injury.**

In other words, it is the potential for injury which defines whether the work is “at height”, not the actual distance above the ground.

Churches are often lofty buildings and a risk of injury can present itself from the need to clean and maintain items at height.

In February 2010 a worker was killed when he fell from height in the Anfield Temple of Praise in Liverpool; in April 2012 Holy Trinity Brompton was prosecuted after a fall resulted in a worker becoming paralysed.

Apart from the risk of prosecution should anything go wrong, it is a basic part of our Christian care for our brothers and sisters who work to keep our church buildings in good order that we should do everything we can to keep them safe.

This guide is presented in the hope it will make it easier for you to do so.

**Look at all the tasks in your church which involve working at height. Is there another way the job can be done without working at height, for instance by working from the ground using long-handled equipment? If so, you should change the way the task is carried out to make it safer.**

## Avoiding Working At Height...

**...is the best way to keep everybody safe!**

The author of this pamphlet has seen some terrifyingly dangerous practices in churches during the course of his work and his academic research.

In Church A, the cleaners were seen regularly leaning over the balcony to clean dust off the ledges; one slip would have resulted in an 18ft fall to the pews below. Church B's Churchwarden used to stand on a chair to reach items down from the top of a wardrobe. In Church C, a rickety stepladder used by the Churchwarden when light bulbs needed changing was missing two of its four rubber feet and was held together with string.

Any of these scenarios could have resulted in a nasty injury or even death. Thankfully, they didn't. Yet... **all of the risks could have been avoided!**

At Church A, extensible brushes could have been used either from the ground or from a safe point within the balcony. Alternatively, the dust could have simply been left there – it wasn't visible from the ground and the balcony is rarely used.

The simplest approach for Church B would be to stop storing items on top of the wardrobe! Failing that, properly-designed steps could have been provided for the Churchwarden to use.

Church C could remove the risks and save money by having all the light bulbs replaced with LED bulbs by a professional electrician using proper access equipment.

LED bulbs last much longer than incandescent or CFL bulbs and so do not need to be replaced nearly as often – and they are much more energy-efficient as well!

This principle should sit at the heart of our approach to working at height: **if you can find a way to avoid working at height, then do so.**

This may require some creativity and lateral thinking. Very often a suggestion for changing the way something is done will be met with the response "But we've *always* done it this way": this must be resisted!

All Parishes should conduct an annual review of Health & Safety based upon a robust assessment of the risks, and this includes working at height.

## Working Safely At Height

Where there is no other way to carry out a task than by working at height, then every care should be taken to ensure the work is done safely.

### Ladders are banned – right?

WRONG! It is a myth that the Health & Safety Executive has banned the use of ladders and stepladders, but they must be used in a safe way by people who know how to use them properly, and how to tell if they might be dangerous.

What you must NOT do, however, is stand on tables or chairs to reach objects at height. This is terribly dangerous – tables and chairs were not designed to be stood upon and can very easily overbalance causing a fall. If this is happening in your church, you must put a stop to it immediately!

### Selecting a Ladder

There are a number of factors to take into account when selecting a ladder.

1. It must be the right height for the job: too short and there is a risk of over-reaching, too long and it may be impractical to use in the space available. Ladders are available in a range of sizes from two or three steps, through seven or eight-rung stepladders, to three-section straight ladders of 10m or more.
2. Your ladder must be of the correct rating, a trade or industrial ladder rather than a domestic one. You must never use a domestic ladder in a church or in any other workplace.

Look out for the Standards **BS EN131** or **BS2037 Class 1** when you are buying a new ladder – if the ladder is not tested to one of these standards, then it is not suitable for use in church.

3. The material of which the ladder is constructed makes a difference. Aluminium is lighter than wood and therefore easier to carry. Fibreglass is lighter again, but a lot more expensive.

## **Check Ladders / Stepladders BEFORE you use them!**

You should check that a ladder is safe before you use it. Don't just assume that the equipment upon which you are relying is undamaged and free from dangerous defects – look at it properly and verify that it is! The photographs opposite, taken on real ladder inspection visits, will help you.

Does it have all its feet? A missing, worn or damaged foot means the ladder will be unstable and could tip over or slip in use. Are all the treads (rungs) present and intact, and are they securely fastened to the ladder? If not, don't use the ladder.

Are there any bends in the stiles (the vertical rails of the ladder)? Or, if the ladder is of wood, are there any splits in the stiles? If there are, don't use the ladder.

For a stepladder, are the stays present and in good working order? These are essential to the ladder's stability so don't use the ladder if the stays are damaged or missing.

Be very suspicious of wooden ladders which have been painted. The paint could hide dangerous defects.

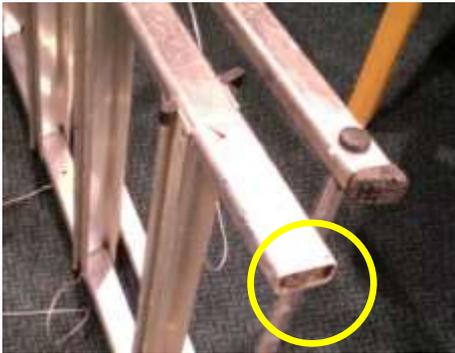
### **GOLDEN RULE:**

**IF A LADDER LOOKS OR FEELS DANGEROUS, IT PROBABLY IS!**

## **THE LADDER ASSOCIATION**

The Ladder Association is a trade body which exists to promote best practice in the selection and use of ladders. It provides certified training courses for ladder inspectors (an inspector with an in-date Ladder Association card is considered a Competent Person to carry out statutory inspections) and users.

FREE guidance on ladder safety may be downloaded from the Ladder Association's website: <http://www.ladderassociation.org.uk> .



**DANGEROUS!**

This ladder is missing a foot.



**DANGEROUS!**

This ladder has a bent stile.



**DANGEROUS!**

This ladder's foot has worn away.  
There is no friction between the ladder and the floor, so it could slip.



**DANGEROUS!**

This ladder was condemned for the state of its treads and a split in one of its stiles.



**GOOD!** Properly designed steps, much safer than standing on a chair



**GOOD!** An in-date safety ticket from a competent ladder inspector.

## Using a Ladder or Stepladder Safely

**As with any piece of equipment, there is a right way and a wrong way to use a ladder. Get it wrong and you might spend the rest of your life regretting it!**

You should take care to ensure that the floor surface is both level and stable where you are going to use the ladder. If it isn't the ladder could easily overbalance and tip you off.

Site the ladder so it is facing the job, so that you do not need to twist, turn or over-reach whilst working.

Make sure that a straight ladder is at the correct angle before you climb it: about 1 in 4 (75 degrees) is right. It should be anchored and / or footed to ensure it cannot slip.

Always fully open a stepladder before climbing it. Make sure that the platform and stays are locked into place.

Maintain three points of contact with the ladder whilst you are on it: two feet and one hand whilst working. Do not lean sideways or backwards off the ladder.

NEVER stand on the platform of a stepladder. The platform is made for tools and equipment, not for standing on!

Never spend more than 30 minutes up a ladder.

Avoid working at height if you are in a church on your own: if you have an accident there will be no-one there to assist you or summon help.

**Make sure everyone in your church who needs to use ladders knows how to do so SAFELY!**

## Maintaining Ladders

***Properly cared-for, a ladder should give many years of safe and useful service – so follow these simple tips!***

In Victorian times it was taught that “Cleanliness is next to Godliness” – and when it comes to ladders it is still true. If you spill anything on your ladder you should clean it off immediately and you should regularly wipe off any accumulation of dust and dirt. It is especially important to keep the feet clean to maintain the correct friction between ladder and floor.

The Law requires that ladders and steps are inspected regularly for safety by a Competent Person. Where ladders see only occasional use, this should be done annually.

A sticker showing the result of the inspection (*above right*) should be affixed to the ladder. If the ladder is found to be unsafe, it must be taken out of use. Damaged ladders can rarely be repaired satisfactorily and should be destroyed and replaced.

If a ladder suffers any accident or damage it should be taken out of use until it can be inspected for safety.

Ladders should be stored horizontally on racks with an adequate number of support points. In order to prevent them warping should not be stored near radiators or in damp conditions, and they should be away from direct sunlight. There should be no items nearby which could fall on the ladders and damage them.



**Check your ladders are clean, and arrange a safety inspection if you haven't already done so.**

## Working at Great Height

**Jacob's Ladder went all the way up to Heaven. Your ladders don't, so know what to do if you need to go higher!**

For working at heights beyond the reach of ladders, or for working at any height for long periods of time, seek professional assistance. It may be that scaffolding is needed, or there may be a requirement for a Mobile Elevated Work Platform ("cherry picker"). Either way, you must make sure that anyone who supplies or uses such equipment at your church (inside or outside) is properly qualified and insured to do so.

When applying for a Faculty to carry out work at height you will be required to show that the work is properly insured. You must ensure that nobody can climb on any scaffolding inside or outside the church.

For high level surveys consider using drones (unmanned aerial vehicles) to take high-resolution stills and video footage. Ensure that your drone pilot is properly licenced by the Civil Aviation Authority and insured before starting.



*Drone footage of the roof and tower, St. Mary The Virgin, Waterloo (Diocese of Liverpool).*

## Fixed Tower Ladders

Many churches are equipped with fixed tower ladders which allow direct access from ground level to parts of the church which are at height, often ten metres or more up. Frequently these are of wood and may not have had any maintenance or inspection since the church was built; they are often in dark locations where any defects, damage or rot will be hard to see. Metal ladders may well be suffering from corrosion. Old ladders, whether of wood or metal, will be highly unlikely to meet modern safety standards and as a result their use cannot be recommended.

If your church has a fixed tower ladder it is extremely important that you ensure no unauthorised person can gain access to it.

For specific advice about fixed tower ladders you should contact your insurer who will be happy to visit and advise.

## Tower Tours



*View of Liverpool Anglican Cathedral, the Wirral Peninsula and the hills of North Wales from the tower of All Saints Church, Edge Hill (Diocese of Liverpool).*

Tower tours are an increasingly popular activity, raising useful revenue for the church whilst allowing the public to enjoy views stretching miles in every direction. Church towers were not built for general access, however, and so organising a tower tour can be a nightmare from a health and safety perspective.



If there is no edge protection on the tower (any parapet or railing needs to be a minimum of 1.2m in height) or if any part of the tower climb involves a vertical fixed ladder then a tower tour is a complete impossibility. The tower pictured (*left*) belongs to the church in which the author of this booklet was baptised – 42m high and lacking edge protection it is definitely not suitable for visitors!

Carry out a full risk assessment before offering tower tours. You will need to consider a wide range of factors, including (but not limited to) the following:

- The condition of the stairway – are there uneven or worn steps? Are there adequate handrails / ropes and are they in good condition?
- Emergency procedures – what would you do if, for instance, somebody had a heart attack two-thirds of the way up the stairway?
- What is the maximum group size you can allow on the tour?
- Are there any trip hazards at the top? Seams in lead gutters, hidden rainwater outlets and the like could cause serious accidents.
- Is there adequate lighting inside the tower?

This is not to say you must not offer tower tours, but if you do it needs to be a serious, professional and well-planned exercise. Do take advice from your insurer before committing to opening your church tower to the public

## Abseiling

Many tasks which involve working at great height can be carried out by abseil teams, saving the cost of scaffolding. Use contractors registered with IRATA – the International Rope Access Training Association.



Charity abseiling events – such as the one in which the author of this booklet took part in 2016 (*photo by Dave Graham*) – are becoming more popular but they are very expensive and time-consuming to organise and so are likely to be beyond the means of all but the best-resourced churches and cathedrals. Any such events must be carried out under properly-qualified professional supervision.

## Fall Arrest Systems

Specifying and installing fall arrest systems (also known as “mansafe systems”) is beyond the scope of this booklet. If your church is fitted with such a system then by law it must be inspected by a Competent Person at least every twelve months and immediately following any live incident. Only those holding an approved training certificate for the equipment may be allowed to use it.

## Birds and Bats

Church towers and spires can be home to some of our most fascinating wildlife. Many urban churches have been colonised by Peregrine falcons (*right*) in recent years, for example, as the steep-sided structures replicate very well the cliffs which are their natural environment. Derby and Brussels Cathedrals are among those which have turned their falcons into attractions, offering camera footage of nests and information about the birds and their behaviour.



It is illegal to disturb Peregrine falcons and other birds of prey which set up home in church towers, as it is to disturb bats and their roosts in any way. If there is any reason to believe that your church is occupied by any of these species then you must obtain specialist advice and a permit from Natural England before proceeding with any works of repair or maintenance at high level.

Feral pigeons, on the other hand, are undesirable guests in a church tower or spire and should be discouraged. Their guano is hazardous to human health and also, being highly acidic, detrimental to stonework. The fitting of anti-roosting spikes is a “List A” job meaning that Faculty permission is not required subject to the condition that non-corroding fixings are used and are fitted into mortar joints rather than directly into stone or brickwork. All other bird deterrent works are subject to Faculty permission.

