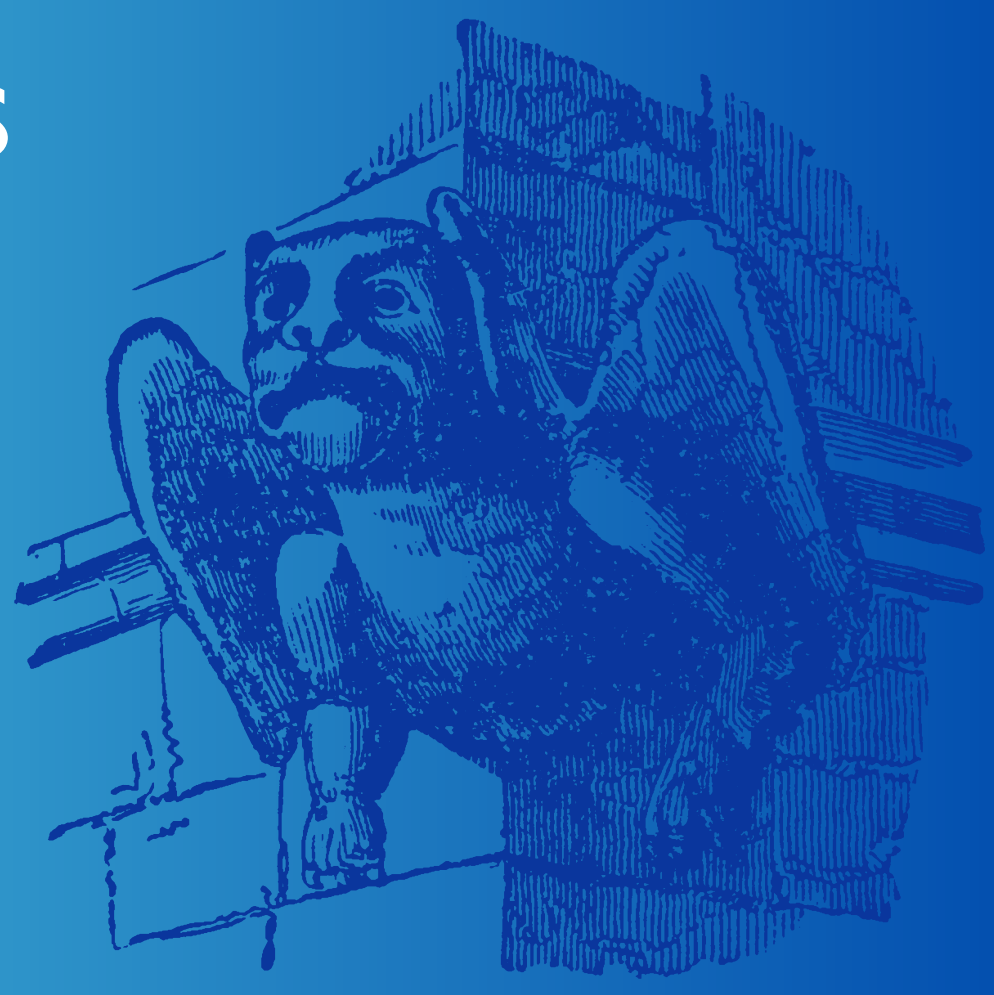
THREE WEAVE
Aerial Intelligence

CHURCH WARDENS HUB • WORKING AT HEIGHT BRIEFING

Where Ladders Should Stop



An introductory guide for church wardens and PCC's setting out the current Work at Height Regulations and diocesan guidance on ladders, access and safe inspection in church buildings.

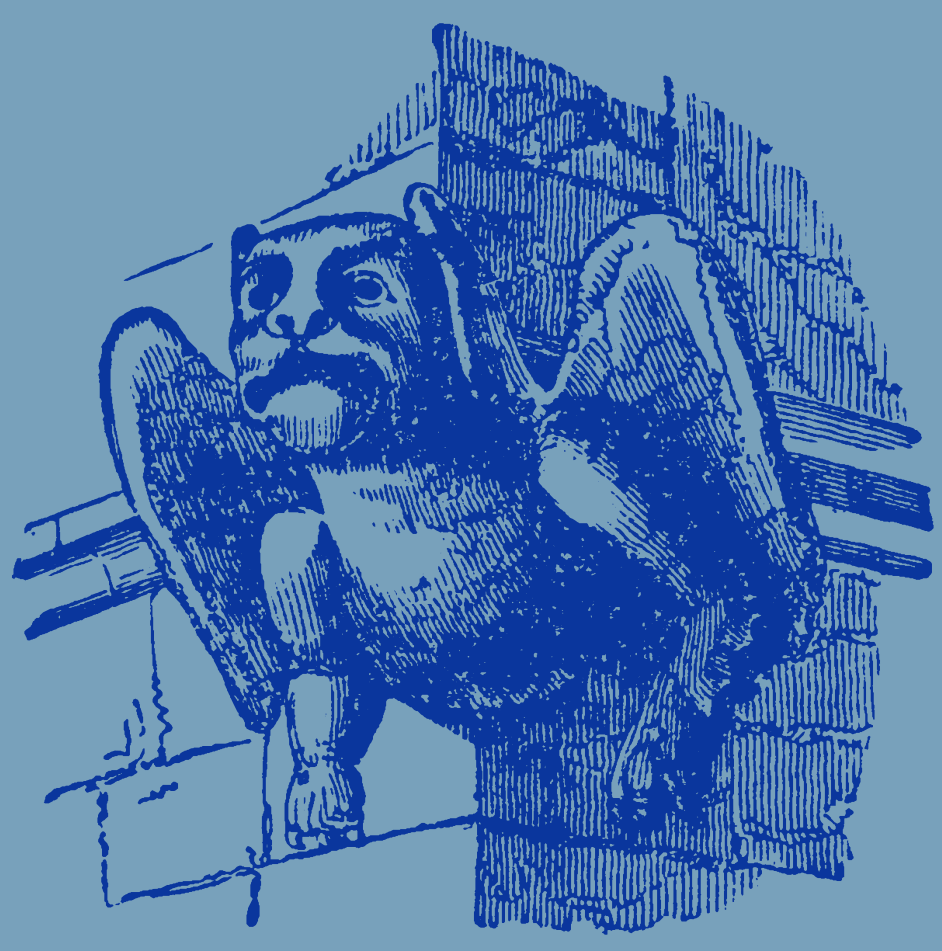
Please Read Before You Continue

This document is provided for general information only and does not constitute professional, safety, engineering, or legal advice or diocesan advice specific to your building. It summarises publicly available guidance from the Health and Safety Executive and a sample of Church of England diocesan materials believed accurate at the date shown on the cover. It is not a risk assessment, and it does not replace one.

Limitation of liability. Three Weave, provides this document in good faith and accepts no responsibility for its completeness or continued accuracy after the date of publication. To the fullest extent permitted by law, Three Weave accepts no liability for any loss, injury, or damage of any kind arising from reliance on, or use of, the information in this document. Anyone working at height, or making decisions about work at height, should obtain their own site-specific risk assessment from a competent person, and should always check the current version of the source guidance before acting on it.

Regulations and diocesan guidance change. This document reflects our understanding of guidance current at the time of writing. It is not updated automatically. Please verify anything safety-critical against the original source before acting on it, particularly if this copy was downloaded some time after its publication date.

If you have any doubt about the safety of a task, do not proceed. Stop, and seek advice from a competent person, your PCC, your diocese, or a qualified professional.



Purpose of this Guide

The purpose of this page is to highlight the risks associated with ladder use in church settings and to explain where ladder use is generally considered appropriate, and where it is not. It is intended to support awareness, discussion, and safer decision-making, not to authorise ladder use or prescribe an operational method.

Church buildings present access challenges that were often not designed with modern maintenance in mind, particularly in relation to gutters, tower tops, parapets, spires, rooflines, and bell chambers. These are often the places where instinct says "just use a ladder", but where the safest answer is frequently "do not".

Why this Matters:

Church wardens are volunteers, not building professionals, yet are often the first person to notice a problem and the first person tempted to go and look closely. This briefing exists to make clear where that instinct should stop, and what a safer next step looks like.

What the Law Actually Requires

Work at height in England and Wales is governed by the Work at Height Regulations 2005, which apply to anyone controlling work at height — including PCCs, as the body legally responsible for the church building and its maintenance. We strogly recommend that you familarise yourself with this critical document.

The Hierarchy of Control

The Regulations set out a clear order of preference, not a free choice of method:

1. Avoid work at height altogether wherever reasonably practicable.

2. Prevent falls using collective protection — guardrails, scaffolds, platforms — before relying on personal protection such as harnesses.

3. Minimise the distance and consequences of a fall where the risk cannot be removed, for example with rest platforms.

A ladder is a legitimate option only after this hierarchy has been considered — it is meant for low-risk, short-duration tasks where a risk assessment shows that equipment offering better fall protection isn't justified.

What "short duration" means in practice

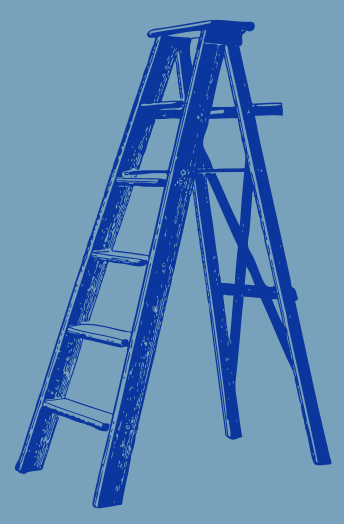
Current HSE guidance suggests that if a task would keep someone on a ladder for more than around 30 minutes at a time, other equipment should be considered instead. Where a ladder rises 9 metres or more above its base, rest platforms or landing areas should be provided at intervals.

Common Misconception:

Ladders are not banned under UK law, and there is no single legal maximum height for ladder use. What the Regulations require is a proper risk assessment before one is used — which is precisely the step that gets skipped when someone just wants a quick look at a gutter.

What Church-Specific Guidance Adds

On top of the general legal position, diocesan guidance — consistent across multiple dioceses' current quinquennial inspection guidance — sets a specific benchmark for churches:



The 3-metre benchmark:

It is strongly recommended that nobody — including a professional adviser and church wardens — should climb a vertical ladder over 3 metres in height. All ladders must be sound, safe and securely fixed."Footing" a ladder with a second person holding it is treated as a last resort, not a safety measure in its own right.

How a ladder should be secured

Guidance sets out a clear order of preference for securing a ladder, from most to least reliable:

1. Tie the ladder to a suitable fixed point, securing both stiles
2. If tying isn't practical, use a proper ladder stability device
3. If that isn't possible, securely wedge the ladder — for example, against a wall
4. Only if none of the above are possible, foot the ladder with a second person — the last resort, to be avoided where any other method is available

Access Points Inside the Building

Where a hatch is used to reach a tower, roof void or bell chamber, current guidance recommends the hatch has a counterweight, and that ladders extend roughly a metre beyond the hatch opening — or have handholds — to make getting on and off the ladder safer. Bell chambers should only be entered once any full-circle bells are confirmed in the "down" position.

Recommended ladder standard

Where a ladder is used at all, it should be a Class 1 "Industrial" ladder or one meeting BS EN 131, properly maintained.

Lower-grade domestic ladders are not considered suitable for this kind of use.

What Current Guidance Says: Safe vs Unsafe Access

The comparison below reflects how HSE and diocesan guidance is generally interpreted in practice. It is a summary, not a checklist to be relied on in place of your own risk assessment.

Generally Treated as Lower-risk	Guidance Generally Advises Against
Ground-level visual checks, including with binoculars, after heavy weather	Climbing a vertical ladder above 3 metres to inspect a roof or tower
Short, low level ladder use (under 3m) for genuinely low-risk, short tasks properly secured.	Using a ladder for more than around 30 minutes continuously
Photographing visible defects from accesible ground or paths	Relying on a second person "footing" a ladder as the main safety measure
Using a hatch with a counterweight and proper ladder extension	Entering a bell chamber without confirming bells are in the "down" position
Commissioning a professional or specialist access method for anything above this line	Using a domestic-grade (non-industrial) ladder for church inspection work

What Current Guidance Says: Safe vs Unsafe Access

Between quinquennial inspections, wardens are encouraged to carry out their own visual checks — ideally at least once a year, and always after a period of heavy weather, since storm damage to roofing and flashings is a common source of water ingress. This can be done entirely safely, without a ladder:

- [ ] Walk the full perimeter of the building at ground level, in good light
- [ ] Use binoculars to check high-level areas — roof lines, valleys, tower tops, finials and rainwater goods
- [ ] Look for staining, damp patches or vegetation growth as early signs of a blocked gutter or defect above
- [ ] Photograph anything of concern, noting the date and location, to track change over time
- [ ] Check accessible rainwater goods (downpipes, gullies) at ground level for blockages or overflow marks
- [ ] Record findings, even if nothing is found — a dated "all clear" is useful evidence too

The limit of a ground check: Binoculars and a walk-round will tell you a great deal, but they cannot substitute for close, professional inspection of high-level areas. If something looks wrong but you can't get close enough to assess it safely, that is the point to ask for help rather than reach for a ladder.

When to Call in Specialist Access

The comparison below reflects how HSE and diocesan guidance is generally interpreted in practice. It is a summary, not a checklist to be relied on in place of your own risk assessment.

Consider bringing in specialist help — rather than a longer ladder — when:

- The area of concern is above the 3-metre benchmark
- You cannot get a stable, secure footing for a ladder near the area
- The task would take longer than a short, low-risk inspection
- You need to document a defect clearly enough to support a faculty application or insurance claim
- Nobody available is trained or confident to assess the risk themselves

Traditional specialist access — scaffolding, cherry-pickers or rope access — is often the right answer for repair work itself. For inspection and documentation purposes, aerial inspection offers a way to see these areas clearly without anyone leaving the ground.

A Safer Way to See What's Above the Line

Three Weave provides aerial inspection for church roofs, towers and spires — giving wardens, PCCs and quinquennial inspectors clear, close imagery of high-level areas without anyone needing to climb a ladder, hire scaffolding, or disrupt services. It's designed to sit alongside your existing inspection routine, not replace it.

Learn more:
threeweave.co.uk/heritage-aerial-intelligence | Church Wardens' Hub: threeweave.co.uk/church-wardens-hub

Important information:

Three Weave provides aerial inspection and visual intelligence services only, and does not undertake formal surveys, structural assessments or risk assessments. This guide summarises general safety guidance believed current as at the date on the cover and is not a substitute for a site-specific risk assessment. Always refer to the current Work at Height Regulations 2005, HSE guidance, and your diocese's own guidance before undertaking any work at height. Professional advice should be sought where required. See the full disclaimer and limitation of liability on page 2 of this document.

The safest outcome is not always to climb less carefully; often it is not to climb at all.

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References & Further Reading

1 Health and Safety Executive — The Work at Height Regulations 2005 and Working at Height: A Brief Guide (INDG401). hse.gov.uk/work-at-height

2 Health and Safety Executive — Safe Use of Ladders and Stepladders (INDG455). hse.gov.uk/work-at-height/ladders

3 Health and Safety Executive — Work at Height: Frequently Asked Questions, including guidance on ladder duration and securing methods.hse.gov.uk/work-at-height/faqs.htm

4 Health and Safety Executive — Construction: Work at Height FAQs, covering ladder securing hierarchy and rest-platform guidance.hse.gov.uk/construction/faq-height.htm

5 Diocese of Oxford — Quinquennial Inspections: Guidance for Parishes, including access and ladder-safety recommendations. oxford.anglican.org

6 Diocese of Norwich — Quinquennial Inspection Reports: Guidance for Parishes. dioceseofnorwich.org

7 Diocese of Manchester — Quinquennial Inspections: Guidance for Parishes, including hatch, ladder and bell-chamber safety guidance.manchester.anglican.org

8 Church Buildings Council / ChurchCare — general guidance on the care and maintenance of church buildings. churchcare.co.uk

9 The Ladder Association — industry guidance on ladder classification (BS EN 131) and safe use standards. ladderassociation.org.uk

10 Churchwardens' Handbook (July 2025 edition) — general churchwarden responsibilities and signposting to Ecclesiastical Insurance and ChurchCare resources.

This document reflects guidance believed current at the time of publication. Regulations and diocesan guidance may be updated — always check the source directly for the latest version before relying on it for a specific decision.