Resurrected and restored

Hartcliffe is not the first place you’d look for holy ground. A vast, deprived, post-war housing estate on the southern edge of Bristol – reputedly one of the most problematic in Britain – it long ago lost its major employer, a tobacco company, and then was told it was to lose its church, too.

But the battered community revolted: the brutish, decaying concrete St Andrew’s might not be pretty, but after decades of baptisms and marriages, festivals and funerals, it had driven roots into apparently stony soil. And, with a clutch of real trees of its own, it provided a rare splash of green.

Thanks to the uprising, it was decided this week that the site will see perhaps the most radical initiative to develop sacred land in England. An international design competition is to be launched on replace the defunct church with a new consecrated building and public park.

I heard the story yesterday from Martin Palmer, who grew up on the estate as the son of a former vicar of St Andrew’s, and to whom the community had turned. A lay preacher, he heads a new campaign to rediscover and revive Britain’s long-forgotten sacred sites, as secretary-general of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation, founded 17 years ago by the Duke of Edinburgh.

Another revival is planned just a few miles down the road at the city’s medieval parish church, St Stephen’s, where a floor map is to be created of “the sacred landscape of Bristol”.

What? Of that old slavers’ port? Yes, Palmer retorts, for believe it or not the city was built in the form of a Celtic cross on virgin land in the ninth century. The city walls made a circle representing “the unity and love of God”, while its four main streets, running to the compass points, formed the central cross.

On a hill to the north – the direction from which evil was believed to come – rose the church of St Michael the Archangel, who fought Satan. To the east, the supposed direction of paradise, stood the funeral church of St Peter, holder of the keys of the Kingdom.

And one dedicated to St Nicholas, patron saint of sailors, was erected over the main port gate.

Bristol is exceptional, but Palmer insists that looking round any part of Britain will reveal visual echoes of its hidden holy landscape – and he recently published a book, Sacred Land, to prove it. As in Bristol, churches are often sited as befits their saints, with St Michael to the north and St Peter to the east of settlements. Similarly, those dedicated to St John the Baptist tend to be found near water and those named after St Christopher – patron saint of travellers – near fords and pilgrim routes.

Place names feature old crosses and long-closed holy wells – one such has been reopened in the unlikely surroundings of Willesden (“the hill with the spring”) in north-west London – while, in their own way, the impromptu roadside flower memorials marking fatal accidents recall pre-Reformation wayside shrines.

Some sacred signs predate Christianity. Extraordinarily, the names of many rivers have been linked with Sanskrit, and seem to have arrived, via Celtic, before the Romans: the Tame, Teme – and Thames – appear to stem from *tamasa*, meaning “dark river”. The Don and Dane are associated with the Hindu god Danu, and so on.

And many experts hold that churches face east not, as commonly believed, to Jerusalem (which is south-east anyway), but to the rising sun.

To Palmer, too, a warning is written in repeated cycles in the sacred landscape. First came the collapse, around 3000 BC, of the primitive civilisation that built the great long barrows, possibly through overuse of the upland soils they cultivated, possibly through a climatic shift.

It was succeeded by the culture that built the stone circles, starting small, but developing into such big sites as Avebury and Stonehenge. But again, as he tells it, this ended abruptly when ash from a volcanic eruption off Iceland dimmed the sun for a decade, causing severe famine. For centuries, Britons then turned away from grand designs that dominated the landscape, until the Romans started the cycle again; the empire’s end has roots in soil exhaustion as well as in barbarian invasion.

Each collapse, he says, came when people “abandoned the simplicity of being a part of nature for the complexity of being apart from nature”: the way to avoid a new one is to renew respect for the natural world and “have a sense of walking on holy ground every day”. If he’s right, I guess Hartcliffe is not a bad place to start.