

St Denis' church and churchyard / nature reserve

Annual report 2023 / 2024

St Denis' church

East window

Well over a year ago we were delighted to hear the Friends of Friendless Churches (FoFC), the owners of St Denis' church, had secured funding for the installation of a new stained glass east window, the final stage of the restoration of the church.

The FoFC's Trustees invited three stained glass artists to submit potential designs, to incorporate a scene from the life of St Denis and to be of 'Victorian-type bright colours like the old window', the preference of those partaking in the survey carried out during the Heritage Open Day event in September 2022. These designs were rejected and the FoFC then approached another three artists.

In March 2024 an initial design by Aidan McRae Thomson, a Rugby-based stained-glass artist, was accepted. This pays homage to the style of Alexander Gibbs, designer of the original window and a close collaborator of William Butterfield who restored the church in 1874. Aidan's work can be seen on <https://aidanmcraethomsonstainedglass.weebly.com>.

The intricate panes he envisages depict episodes from the legend of St Denis through to his martyrdom and include a small image of St Denis' church cradled by two hands signifying it being rescued from its redundancy. A fuller description and a photograph of the proposed design are on the Hatley website – www.hatley.info/news_events/news/this-is-rather-good.

Aiden McRae Thomson and the FoFC will be visiting the church on 30th May. Apart from finalising the design and making the window, the tracery around the window needs to be repaired and listed building consent obtained. Installation is unlikely until late 2024 / early 2025.

Church in general

The end of Phase 3 of the restoration work

Stephanie Norris, the architect, and Michael Hayhow of Lodge & Sons (Builders) Ltd, who carried out the restoration work to repair and replaster the nave walls and other repairs between January and May 2022, visited the church on 2nd June 2023 to inspect the work carried out at the 'end of rectification period for Phase 3'. A few minor areas of plaster identified as needing attention have since been put right.

The building has rising damp as can be seen in places by the darker colour of the plaster and the wet stone steps. This has been reported to the FoFC. We suspect a major donation is required to rectify this problem.

Within the church

Display boards with photos and sketches of the interior of St Denis' from early times to the present day prepared for the Heritage Open Day event in 2022 remain on display. Joyce Denby has added an information sheet entitled 'Sanctuary' to her numerous sheets on features around the church.

The certificate awarded to Stephanie Norris for the 'Best conservation, alteration or extension of an existing building – under £2M' in 2023 under the annual Greater Cambridge Design and Construction Award scheme is on display.

Joyce Denby's documents on display include: *A short history of East Hatley: its families and church* (copies available for £2); *Some Hatley clerics – their impecunious lives and times*; and notes on *Families* which include the 1841-1911 census, with an invitation for additional contributions.

In addition, there are copies of the A5 leaflets Peter Mann has produced on the church, along with *39 things about St Denis' as you look around*, *Cave spiders under the church* (see below) and a flyer on the new window, which he also enlarged as an A3 'poster' and placed under the window; Nicola kindly had it laminated.

During the parish council's 2023/2024 financial year, £35.97 was collected for the FoFC in the donation bowl – unfortunately £3.85 was stolen on 17th March. QR codes direct to the FoFC are on display and these may have generated further income.

Visitors

On 20th July 2023, Peter Mann and Joyce Denby showed round 18 members of Wrestlingworth History Society, a follow-up to the presentation on St Denis' Peter gave to the Society on 16th March 2023.

Two new FoFC staff members, Zachariah Young (Operations Manager) and Maggie Goodall (Volunteer Coordinator) visited on 15th November.

Between 1st April 2023 and 31st March 2024, 41 visitors / families signed the visitors' book, the majority from not far away; others were from Cumbria, South Yorkshire, Devon, Swansea, London and Germany as well as Idaho, Phoenix and Montana, USA.

We are not now participating in the annual Heritage Open Day event as the church is open daily.

Future use of the church?

We are open to suggestions for any events, displays or exhibitions that might be held in the church during the summer months. Please spread the word!

Contribution to an article on wildlife in FoFC's churches

A short item about the cave spiders under the church will be appearing in the May issue of the FoFC's members' magazine as a contribution to *Heavenly habitats*, a feature on various wildlife in, under and around five of FoFC's churches. Nicola Jenkins prepared the text with help from John O'Sullivan and Peter Mann, and John's photographs. Peter has converted this to a handout. (see above).

Bats

Survey of bats emerging from the church on 8 June 2023

Rachel Bates organised five members of Cambridgeshire Bat Group to count the bats emerging from the vestry of St Denis' church at dusk on 8th June. They counted out 14 brown long-eared bats. A static detector inside the church picked up a few more plus some calls from barbastelle bats. Common pipistrelles were recorded foraging outside. Rachel recorded some video footage of the bats inside with an infrared camera.

National Bat Monitoring Programme 2024

In March 2024 Rachel Bates signed us up to contribute data from St Denis' church to the [National Bat Monitoring Programme](#), used by the government and conservation organisations to monitor the health of our environment, inform policy and improve the conservation of bats. This will involve recording the number and species of bats emerging from the church at dusk during the maternity roost season, twice in June. Nicola hopes to set up a rota of local volunteers to carry out additional surveys every one or two weeks until the end of August. Members of the Bat Group will give some training.

We owe a sincere vote of thanks to Peter Mann for liaising with the FoFC, for updating and improving website pages on St Denis' church, and for opening the church every morning and closing it at dusk. As always, thanks to Joyce Denby and Peter for showing round occasional visitors. Thanks, too, to Joyce for decorating the church at Christmas.

St Denis' Churchyard / Local Nature Reserve

New management plan; species survey

Lucy Wilson, the local Wildlife Trust's Conservation Officer, initiated a revision of the 2010 management plan for the churchyard/nature reserve in late March 2023. Two volunteer officers, Louisa Carlisle and Tate Oulton surveyed the plants, trees, butterflies and birds on 30th May and 14th July 2023 and sent us a spreadsheet of the results on 19th February 2024. It is on the Hatley website.

Louisa also prepared a new management plan, which we received on 1st November 2023. It was the subject of a meeting between Revd Hilary Young, Nicola Jenkins, Sebastian Kindersley and Peter Mann on 19th November. Nicola has discussed her draft notes on the meeting with Hilary and will disseminate them soon.

The churchyard is under the management of St Denis' Local Nature Reserve Management Group, known by Gamlingay and Hatley Parochial Church Council (owners of the churchyard) as the 'task group'. Revd Hilary Young and members Nicola Jenkins, Sebastian Kindersley, Peter Mann and Al Smith (relatively new to the group) are jointly responsible for decisions. The new management plan will be published once one or two edits have been made. Joyce Denby is happy to contribute to the group; she and others are most welcome to participate.

Scything

Part of the southern area of the churchyard was scythed during a scything course on 11th July 2023. The course was attended by Hilary, Nicky Adkins, Peter Condon, Nicola Jenkins and Kate Laugharne. It also covered management of grass and wild flowers. Scything is to be put into practice in Everton, Gamlingay and Hatley churchyards.

A group of volunteers scythed part of the northern section of the churchyard/nature reserve on 17th August – Nicola Jenkins, Kate Laugharne and her daughter Bronwen, Revd Hilary Young and Mark Wilsher. Peter Condon and Nicola finished this area later in the month. Peter Mann then lowered the grass further with his ride-on mower. Thanks very much to these volunteers.

Winter work

Brambles and suckers encroaching the western border of the churchyard were cut back and a dead hedge made with the cuttings by working parties on 14th January and 10th February 2024. We are very grateful to Janice and Trevor Bellars, Joyce Denby, Peter Hanlon, Nicola Jenkins and Alastair Smith, Angela Steel, Mark Wilsher for their hard work. Nicola and Matthew Wright also did some work on 2nd February and 8th March. A few trees along this edge need to be felled but this will not be done until the autumn.

Scythe mower

We decided at the November management meeting to sell the 'St Denis' mower' as it was not very easy to use, was awkward to store and had not been used for two years. We are now intending to cut the long grass by scything.

The mower was sold to Simon Saggars, who purchased it on behalf of Wendy Nature Reserve, for £250. Thanks to Peter Mann for finding its value and to Mark Wilsher for finding a buyer. The mower belonged to Gamlingay and Hatley Parochial Church Council, to whom the money went.

For the record, it was an AL-KO scythe mower, model BM5001R with 102 cm blade, purchased in March 2013 with a grant from SCDC. It was blessed by Revd Steven Rothwell on 9th June 2023 (see www.hatley.info/hatleys-churches/st-denis-churchyard/a-mower-blessed/). Thanks to Peter for storing the mower.

Interment; gravestone

The ashes of Ishbel Beatty, who died on 5th May 2023, were interred on 24th June in a ceremony conducted round the grave of Simon Keith's wife, Gill by Revd Hilary Young.

A gravestone for Patricia and Sydney Brown (Nicola Jenkin's parents) was erected in March 2024.

The churchyard now

Peter Mann mowed footpaths in the churchyard on 4th May. We did not carry out a mid-March cut because of the high rainfall during the season. Amongst the flowers at the moment are cowslips, bugle, yellow rattle, pink clover.

We are very grateful to Peter Mann for mowing the paths and other areas as necessary during the year and for keeping down the nettles growing against the church walls. Thanks also for putting down more wood chippings at the muddy end of the church path.

For more detail on both the church and churchyard/nature reserve please refer to the reports for the July and October 2023 and January and March 2024 Parish Council meetings on <https://www.hatley.info/parish-council/reports/>.

Nicola Jenkins and Peter Mann / 20 May 2024