

39 things about St Denis' as you look round

Welcome to our award winning church

Simply standing staring, thinking how it must have once been and gathering your thoughts are all fine occupations.

1. **East Hatley's church, dedicated to St Denis**, is constructed of fieldstones and is listed Grade II*; the earliest record is 1217.
Sir George Downing restored the building in the 1670s, as did William Butterfield in 1874. It was declared redundant and closed in 1959 and taken on by South Cambs District Council in 1985.
By 2002 ivy covered almost the entire building, which caused [considerable damage](#) to the roof and walls and destroyed the windows. SCDC removed the ivy in 2003 and restored the building to a 'safe shell' in 2005-2006 – but with no use for it, gave it to the **Friends of Friendless Churches** (FoFC) in 2016, which has restored the floor, walls and windows. There is no electricity or running water.

Starting in the porch...

2. **Rebuilt and enlarged by Butterfield**, 1874. The assortment of stone and bricks were originally hidden under plaster. LOOK UP TO THE...
3. **Downing plaque** over the door. [Sir George Downing's](#) coat of arms on the left and those of Lady Frances Howard, his wife, on the right. 1673 is the date of the Test Act – only those taking communion in a CoE church could hold public office, making this a flamboyant way of showing his credentials; Downing Street, London, is named after him.
4. **Graffiti on the doorway arch**. The arch was rebuilt in 1874 using Bath stone and local clunch (less expensive but weathers badly).
5. **Doors**, 1874 – with nicely crafted wrought iron hinges and key plate.

The nave

6. **Medieval** – empty and plain now, but for hundreds of years St Denis' was the only village amenity. Back in the day there were probably a few rough benches – pews only appeared in the 1500s. [Butterfield](#), keen to make the whole church inclusive and to enable rich and poor to see what was going on, removed the high box stalls, replacing them with 'conventional' pews, in turn sold after the church closed.

7. **New plaster**, 2022. With Butterfield's 1874 plasterwork being in a poor state, the FoFC removed the worst, replastering with a lime mortar mix and then a lime wash, coloured to match Butterfield's original. The lime mortar binding the fieldstones under the plaster – probably several hundred years old – was / is in very good condition.
8. **New windows and floor**, 2018. The floor was originally stamped mud, later stone and re-laid by Butterfield in 1874 with a mixture of stone, wood and tiles – many stolen after the church was closed in 1959, when the windows fell prey to the elements, ivy and vandals; the stone window surrounds in the nave are likely to be from the 1300s, largely of clunch, with some restoration in 2006 and 2018-22.
9. **Hatches in the floor**, 2018 – those in the nave reveal the medieval timbers from the roof, reused by Butterfield to support his new floor as part of his 1874 restoration project. Very green!

Nave – west wall

10. **Marble tablet**, 1751. It commemorates the Revd Mr Wm Cray Say.
11. **Hook for bell rope** – there was a bell (now lost) in the bellcote on the outside. There was also a sanctus bell inside the church – now in the tower of the church in Hatley St George (and occasionally rung).
12. **Font**, 1874. Bath stone, designed and installed by Butterfield – whose designs have been considered to be 'curious geometry'[†].
13. **John Shipston floor slab**, 1737. He was Sir George Downing III's estates steward.

Nave – north wall (opposite the main door)

14. **Putlog holes** – two of the many created to hold the wooden scaffolding as the walls were being built. They were revealed when the old plaster was removed in 2022 and left as a reminder of an historic building technique. There are two more putlogs opposite.
15. **North door** – possibly blocked by Downing when he restored the church in the 1670s; mostly fieldstones on the outside, an assortment of blocks of stone inside. As with the putlogs, they were hidden under a layer of plaster and only revealed when the crumbling plaster was removed in 2022, re-pointed and left unplastered for historical interest.
16. **Graffiti** on the right hand side of the north doorway arch.

[†] 'curious geometry' – *World of Interiors*, January 2025, page 48: review of *The Master Builder: William Butterfield and His Times* by Nicholas Olsberg.



17. **A Charles Portway 'Tortoise' stove**, 1874 – so called because it burned very slowly to 'extract the maximum amount of heat from the fuel' (coke, later coal); the beautiful cast iron lid bears their motto 'Slow but sure combustion'. There's an airway from the furnace chamber by the porch, with fumes going through the pipe to the chimney outside. Given how cold the church gets in winter, it's debatable how much warmth the stove provided.
18. **Docwra tomb stone** (behind the stove) – Katherine Docwra's brass effigy (from around 1535) is in Hatley St George church; the other effigies are missing. Also there are the memorials from this church to the men of East Hatley who served and fell in the two world wars.
19. **Castell tomb slabs** – Constance 1610 (on the left) and her grandson Robert 1665; the Castells owned and lived in East Hatley until they sold the estate to George Downing in 1661.
20. **Pulpit**, 1874. Bath stone base: its wooden top disappeared long ago. The original pulpit, on the south wall, was removed by Butterfield.
21. **Piscina**, 1874, for draining holy water into holy ground; a typical Butterfield design in Bath stone – there's another one opposite.

Chancel arch

22. **Rebuilt and widened** by Butterfield; Bath stone and clunch.
23. **Medieval niches** either side of the arch would have held statuettes. Traces of red paint were found during the 2021 restoration work.

Chancel, north side

24. **A blind window** – it was probably an opening with wooden shutters (rather than glass) to let in fresh air / expel stale candle air; we don't know who blocked it up, but Butterfield was keen to retain it and also the fieldstone wall around it; in lengthening the chancel, he rebuilt most of the walls – quarried fieldstones on the outside, brick inside.
25. **Torus moulding**, 1874. Bath stone – this and the red-tiled criss-cross pattern and edging are Butterfield's church decoration at its simplest.
26. **Vestry**, 1874. Added by Butterfield. It must have been cramped to work in... by candlelight, too. The FoFC put in a new external door in 2018 – made of oak and with a vertical slot for bats to use.
27. **Altar rail** – removed or stolen after the church was closed in 1959, as evidenced by the two vertical strips in the damaged stonework.

East wall and window

28. **Butterfield's sanctuary and reredos**, 1874. He had a reputation for covering everything in polychromatic tiles (especially in city churches), but on a tight budget minimised their use in country churches – even so, the reredos, with its stone cross, is pretty startling. The FoFC replaced five missing slabs of stone in the lower section in 2022. You are standing on Butterfield's 1874 tiles – those in the nave are new.
29. **The east window**, circa 1874, was badly damaged by high winds and ivy in the 1960s; the FoFC has commissioned [a new window](#) – installation is likely to be in 2026.

Chancel – south wall

30. **Niche by Butterfield** – art meets practicality! Somewhere for the parson to put his bible, prayer book and a candle during a service.
31. **Windows** – first installed in 1874 when Butterfield enlarged the chancel. Like all the other windows, they were badly damaged by high winds, ivy and vandals.
In 2021, the FoFC replaced them with new windows – in the left hand one they incorporated a few pieces of the stained glass from the old east window, found by a dog walker some 35 years ago, kept in his garage and given to the FoFC after they took on St Denis' in 2016. The stained glass is by [Alexander Gibbs](#) – the wonderful head is by no ordinary artist.
32. **Exposed bricks** – in 2021 to keep Butterfield's remaining plaster intact, the FoFC decided to consolidate the edges of the plaster.

Nave – south wall

33. **A niche and a piscina** – see points 23 and 21.
34. **Putlog holes** – see point 14.
35. **Fieldstones over the south door** – a visual reminder of the main construction material in the nave, now hidden under the plaster.

Roof

36. **Butterfield replaced** the entire roof in 1874, using the best of the old medieval timbers as floor supports, as revealed under some of the floor hatches. For the rafters, Butterfield used Baltic pine – still in fine condition; the white material behind them is insulation added in 2006 when the roof was retiled after a mass of ivy was removed – it had been allowed to grow over the church, causing considerable damage.



Outside

37. **The furnace chamber** next to the porch is kept locked because there's no lighting, it's extremely claustrophobic, the steps down are very steep (and often knee deep in water), making it a perfect home for cave spiders – 5 cm long creatures which love those conditions.
38. **If you walk round the church**, take a close look at the differing fieldstones – the medieval stones around the nave are smaller and rougher than the quarried stones Butterfield used for the chancel.
- You'll also see odd pieces of dressed stone within the main walls – usually indicating a putlog. The old tracery in the nave windows is much weathered, but the simple cusped decoration indicates the windows date from the early 1300s. On the north side is the chimney for the stove – simple, functional and very Victorian looking.
39. **The graveyard** is still consecrated and owned by the Diocese of Ely; it is also a Local Nature Reserve and County Wildlife Site.

Hatley was always a poor place, hence few gravestones – perhaps the most interesting is [John Perkins'](#), a keen countryman and huntsman who lived at the Palace (99 East Hatley) until his death in 1901. He was Downing College's Bursar and manager of its East Hatley estates – he asked to be buried near enough to Buff Wood to hear the Cambridgeshire hounds working through it. His sister Martha's grave is on the right.

In spring the [churchyard](#) is full of wild flowers, including Star of Bethlehem, snowdrops, orchids, primroses and cowslips, which happily grow with abundance in East Hatley. A local management team keeps an eye on the building and ensures the churchyard is kept tidy.



St Denis' church

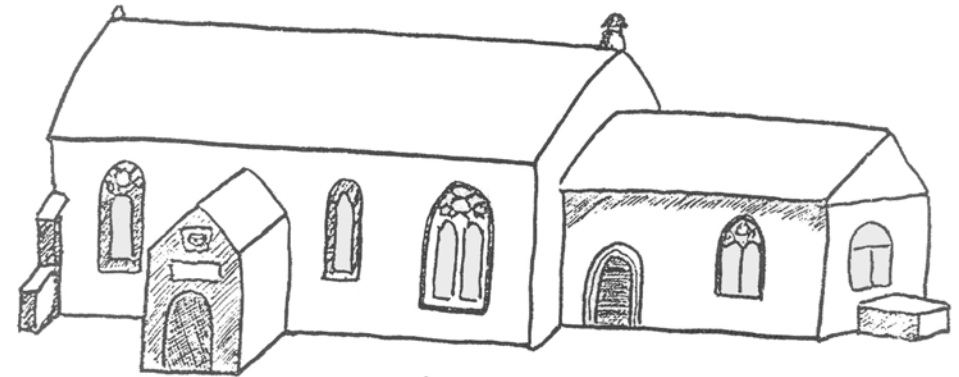


FoFC donations

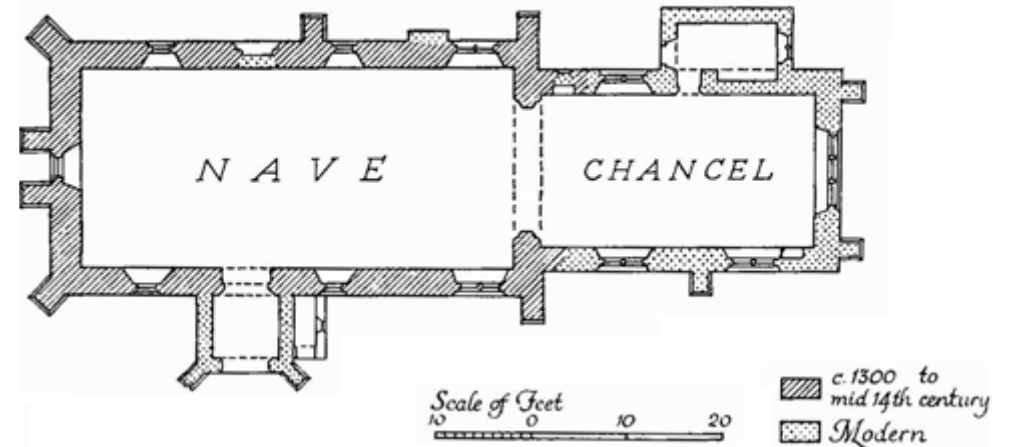


Award winner

Our earliest illustration of St Denis'



HATLEY Former Parish Church of St. Denis, East Hatley



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