

The church of St Denis, East Hatley

Text / photos: Peter Mann

St Denis' church in East Hatley, Cambridgeshire, dates to 1217; most of the surviving medieval elements are from the 1300s. It was restored in the 17th century by Sir George Downing (Downing Street in London is named after him) and again 200 years later by William Butterfield, the noted 19th century architect.

St Denis' was last used for worship in 1959, with virtually everything stripped out in the 1960s, when the church was left to rot; to prevent its demolition, in 1985 it was deconsecrated and ownership conveyed to South Cambridgeshire District Council.

On 30th November 2016, SCDC gave St Denis' to the Friends of Friendless Churches (FoFC) – it became the first church with a Butterfield connection in its portfolio of (now) over 60 churches.

Having locked the doors in 1959, what followed was inevitable: the building started to decay and by 2002 high



▲ St Denis' church, East Hatley in 2022: a handsome building made largely of fieldstones and now owned by the Friends of Friendless Churches, which is safeguarding it in perpetuity.

▼ St Denis' in 2002: covered in ivy and in danger of collapse.



winds and a stupendous overgrowth of ivy (photo, front cover) had caused significant damage to the roof and walls, with some parts of the structure deemed unsafe.

At this point SCDC was all for allowing it to fall into ruin, but – fortunately – being listed Grade II* and as the ultimate guardian of listed buildings in south Cambridgeshire, it had no alternative but to agree to restore the building to at least a ‘safe shell’ (in which I played a small part!).

Removing the ivy revealed severe damage to part of the external walls, with the gable ends unstable and in danger of collapse. The roof tiles were insecure and taking the ivy off affected the integrity of the roof and the walls, leaving many loose tiles and much of the flint facing on the walls decayed.

Girding their loins, the good councillors at SCDC agreed to restore St Denis’: by 2006, thanks to a major grant from English Heritage and funding from SCDC and Hatley Parish Council, the roof had been re-tiled (with ‘proper’ clay tiles) and the stonework around the walls repaired or replaced.

Sadly, even with a £150,000 budget, there wasn’t enough money for a new floor, windows or, indeed, any work inside, so the doors remained locked... until 2022.

In the 1670s Sir George Downing carried out restoration work – he owned East Hatley and had a house here, demolished a generation later: he added a porch to the south door, but possibly spent more on the splendid cartouche of his coat of arms above the door to tell visitors of his new-found aristocratic connections – prominent is 1673, 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. His wealth eventually founded Downing College, Cambridge.

In 1874 on behalf of Downing College, William Butterfield made changes to the nave, extended the chancel, added the vestry and re-roofed the church – using the old medieval timbers to support a new floor. It is remarkable Butterfield had time for us, for he was one of the ‘go-to’ church architects of the day (famous even then for bringing originality to the Gothic revival) and in the middle of building Keble College, Oxford. His

polychromatic detailing in the chancel is a reminder of his genius.

The emptiness of St Denis’ adds to its magic and, perhaps because it still looks and feels like a church, it was, in 2011 and 2012, used for two Taizé services, revealing its wonderful acoustic – not experienced for 52 years.

In the nave, apart from some obvious signs of Butterfield’s restoration – the pulpit base and font (with its ‘curious geometry’†) – and the stove (an early 20th century addition to replace his underfloor heating), a visitor from 1325 could feel at home, only perhaps wondering what happened to the brightly coloured walls and rough benches of their day; a visitor from 1725 would ask what happened to the lovely box pews... well, Butterfield, keen to make the church inclusive, widened the chancel arch and removed the high box stalls, replacing them with ‘conventional’ pews (in turn sold after the church was closed), enabling rich and poor to see what was going on. One of the old pews has been turned into a chest-cum-seat.

They might even like the new floor and windows installed by the Friends of Friendless Churches in 2018 and (in the chancel) in 2021, including a few pieces of the stained glass from the old east window, found by a dog walker some 35



▲ The Downing plaque above the south door. The church is opened every day.

▼ The FoFC took ownership of St Denis’ in 2016, putting in a new floor and windows and, in 2022, replastering much of the nave.



† ‘curious geometry’ – *World of Interiors*, January 2025, page 48: review of *The Master Builder: William Butterfield and His Times* by Nicholas Olsberg (ISBN: 978-1-84822-371-4).

years ago, kept in his garage and given to the FoFC after they took on St Denis'. The glass is by Alexander Gibbs – this wonderful head (right) is by no ordinary artist.

The FoFC has commissioned a new east window from the stained glass artist [Aiden McRae-Thomson](#); installation is likely to be in 2026.

As the guardian of St Denis', we have a lot to thank the FoFC for, not least the £300,000 it has invested (aided by public grants) in restoring St Denis', particularly in 2022 when much of the nave was replastered and the reredos restored.

Rightly, St Denis' is an award winning church – in March 2023 it won *The Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service* and *Cambridge Forum for the Construction Industry's* 'Best conservation under £2m' category – use the QR link below for more detail.

The churchyard is still consecrated and owned by the Diocese of Ely – you can be buried here if you wish. It is also a designated Local Nature Reserve and a County Wildlife Site, active with badgers, foxes, moles, ants, birds and a whole range of wild flowers, including cowslips, which grow with abundance in East Hatley, orchids and Star of Bethlehem.

St Denis' is home to bats (in the roof) and cave spiders (in the furnace chamber) which share a building with no electricity, running water or vehicle access, all combining to make it an unusually peaceful place – a local management team keeps an eye on the building and ensures the churchyard is kept tidy.

Thanks to the restoration work carried out by the FoFC, St Denis' is **open every day from around 8.30 am to dusk** to look around or for quiet contemplation.



▲ Stained glass by Alexander Gibbs – rescued from the old east window and now part of a new window in the chancel of St Denis'.

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buzzassociates.co.uk

St Denis' church:
hatley.info/hatleys-churches

Friends of Friendless Churches:
friendsoffriendlesschurches.org.uk



St Denis' church



FoFC donations



Award winner