

St Denis' church and churchyard / nature reserve

Annual report 2024 / 2025

St Denis' church

East window

A year ago we reported the initial design by Aidan McRae Thomson for the new window had been accepted by the Trustees of the Friends of Friendless Churches (FoFC).

Aidan visited the church on 30th May 2024 with Rachel Morley, director of FoFC, and Stephanie Norris, the FoFC's architect for this project, to look at the window and talk about the design. In early August, internal scaffolding was erected at the east end – on 13th August, Aidan and Stephanie came to survey the window and surrounding stonework. Stephanie was aware the stone arch needed pinning but this inspection revealed the tracery sections to be in worse condition than suspected.

Aidan submitted a revised design for the window on 11th January 2025. The Trustees discussed this and made some suggestions for further developing the design but were happy to proceed to apply for planning permission for repair of the masonry and installation of the window. An application, reference [25/01044/LBC](#), was submitted and validated by the planning department of South Cambs District Council on 17th March; Hatley Parish Council, raised no objections at its meeting on 1st April. As of today (19th May 2025), the SCDC website shows status as 'Awaiting decision' – the 'Determination deadline' was 12th May. As the relevant conservation body has welcomed the application, it is unlikely to be refused.

A date for work on the window is still to be announced – work can only commence after the bats have hibernated for winter. We hope the window will be in place in time for the Heritage Open Days in September 2026.

Some fragments of stained glass from the original east window which Simon Damant had picked up many years ago were passed to Aidan in July 2024. More pieces discovered in Damant's loft in January 2025 have been passed to him. These are thought to originate from the tracery lights. Both Aidan and Stephanie think it unfeasible to incorporate them in the design but suggest they could be formed into a stand-alone panel or fitted into another chancel window.

Rising damp

Unfortunately rising damp continues to affect the interior of the church. The plaster, perfect after renovations in the spring of 2022, has darkened in places and some pieces have bubbled and fallen off. Damp is often visible on the steps, the pulpit platform and the tomb slab of Robert

Castell. Some green mould has grown at the base of one column. Eric Barnes Green from Seion Church & Chapel who carried out an annual maintenance check of St Denis' on 9th February was made aware of the damp problems and they have been reported to the FoFC.

Bats

Rachel Bates of the Cambridgeshire Bat Group submitted counts of brown long-eared bats emerging from the vestry of St Denis' on eleven evenings between 9th June and 4th September 2024 to the National Bat Monitoring Programme. She recorded bats with an infrared camera on three occasions; counts were carried out by Linda Hudson, Nicola Jenkins and Al Smith on other evenings. A group of thirteen East Hatley and Gamlingay residents enjoyed an evening counting the bats on 28th July.

The species of bats emerging from the church and foraging around the churchyard which Rachel recorded with her camera were: brown long-eared, common pipistrelle, soprano pipistrelle, Nathusius' pipistrelle, barbastelle, noctule and serotine.

Cave spiders

Nicola Jenkins contributed a short item on the cave spiders under the church for the June 2024 issue of FoFC's magazine as part of an article about various wildlife in, under and around five of FoFC's churches entitled 'Heavenly habitats'.

An organ for St Denis'?

In February, the FoFC asked whether St Denis' church could provide a good home for the organ from the Methodist Church in Rushton Spencer, Staffordshire. It had a hand-pumping mechanism. Peter Mann replied that St Denis' could be very cold and damp, the floor may not bear the organ's weight and the organ would only be played very occasionally. All in all, St Denis' would be an unsuitable church for the organ – which the FoFC accepted.

Thanks

We owe a sincere vote of thanks to Peter Mann for all he does for the church – opening it every morning and closing it at dusk, liaising with the FoFC, and updating and improving website pages about the church. As always, thanks to Joyce Denby and Peter for showing round occasional visitors. Thanks to Joyce for decorating the church for the Christmas season.

St Denis' Churchyard / Local Nature Reserve

Scything and mowing

The north side and part of the south side of the churchyard was scythed in three main sessions in July (20th, 22nd and 25th) and in a few short sessions at the beginning of August. The majority of the south side was left uncut following the advice of the management plan to leave a different

third of the churchyard uncut each year. Cuttings were left for a few days to allow seeds to drop and insects and mammals to find a new habitat, then raked and piled in the north west corner or scattered under the hedgerows. Scything was carried out by Peter Condon, Nicola Jenkins, Kate Laugharne, Mark Wilsher and Revd Hilary Young, raking and clearing by Nicola Jenkins and Angela Steel. Sincere thanks to all those helpers and to Peter Mann who went over the scythed area with his ride-on mower.

Thank you to Peter Mann for mowing the footpaths. An article explaining the benefits of scything and encouraging more people to learn to scythe and get involved locally was published in the January/February issue of the *Gazette*.

Scything Workgroup

The Haslingfield & Harlton Eco Group has launched a [Scything Workgroup](#) for Cambridgeshire residents who know how to scythe or would like to learn to scythe, or who are willing to help raking. A free training day was held in Wellhouse Meadow, Haslingfield on 1st December when scything expert Jim McVittie taught scything techniques and on 30th March when he taught how to peen and sharpen scythes. Community groups have put forward dates they would like help scything their meadows or churchyards and a calendar is being set up for evening scything and raking sessions throughout this summer and early autumn. Jim McVittie is providing his expert help at all scything sessions and will bring along scythes. Dates are being arranged for Scything Workgroup members to help in St Denis' churchyard, St Mary's churchyard, Gamlingay, St Mary's churchyard in Everton and possibly Millbridge Brook Meadows, Gamlingay. Jim McVittie and another group member have visited these sites.

Meetings

The group managing the churchyard, now called the St Denis' Churchyard Task Group, met on 26th October (and 5th April 2025) to discuss the work to be done. Group members are: Hilary Young, Nicola Jenkins, Sebastian Kindersley, Peter Mann, Alastair Smith, and Mark Wilsher. Thanks to Hilary Young for leading the meeting and Sebastian Kindersley for hosting it. It is hoped to dredge the moat at the back of the churchyard this autumn.

Winter work

Three sessions were held in the churchyard over the winter. On 22nd November a group of seven volunteers cut back brambles and suckers encroaching into the western border of the churchyard. Cuttings were made into a dead hedge near the ditch on that edge. Mark Wilsher cut down a few dead elms.

On 19th January a group of seven volunteers cut back the elm hedgerow to the height it was two years before and reduced its width slightly. Cuttings were moved to the dead hedge. Mark Wilsher cut down two or three dead elms rooted on the field side of the ditch that were falling into the churchyard.

On 22nd February, three volunteers continued work on the western edge of the churchyard, pruning spindle, cutting back suckers, uprooting some brambles and moving the cuttings to the dead hedge. Mark felled a couple more dead elms in that border. Peter Mann filled in snuffle holes.

Sincere thanks to Joyce Denby, Peter Hanlon, Peter Hayward, Sofie Hooper, Nicola Jenkins, Peter Mann, Charlie Norman, Al Smith and Mark Wilsher. Thanks to Al for supervising cutting the elm hedgerow and to Mark for use of his equipment.

Flora and fauna

In spring and summer 2024, flowers included primrose, early dog violet, red dead-nettle, celandine, cowslip, yellow rattle, agrimony, lady's bedstraw, oxeye daisy, speedwell, meadow vetchling, red and white clover, common spotted orchid, bee orchid, pyramidal orchid and star of Bethlehem. Scything gave mice and voles chance to escape and ants in some ant hills skirted round in scything helped the food web. Butterfly numbers were less than normal. Only two large white and six meadow browns were observed on 19th July for the [Big butterfly count](#). In the autumn and winter, spindle fruits were abundant and a glorious pink. Displays of snowdrops were beautiful. This spring, we had a lovely show of primroses near the church and cowslips and bugle have been prolific. Blackthorn and hawthorn have flowered recently. At the moment the many clumps of star of Bethlehem are looking very pretty.

Update

Wildlife Trust's Conservation Churchyard Award

We are pleased to report that, following a visit by Diana Cook of the local Wildlife Trust on 28th April this year, St Denis' churchyard scored the necessary points to gain the [Wildlife Trust's Conservation Churchyard Award](#) at Bronze level.

Nicola Jenkins and Peter Mann / 19th May 2025