

The Church of St Denis, East Hatley

by Peter Mann

St Denis' church in East Hatley dates from 1217. It was substantially restored in 1874 by William Butterfield, the notable 19th century architect, and last used for worship in 1959.

In 1985, to prevent its demolition by the Diocese, it was de-consecrated and ownership conveyed by the Church Commissioners to South Cambridgeshire District Council.

SCDC is about to give St Denis' to the Friends of Friendless Churches – it will be the first Butterfield church in their portfolio of over 40 churches.

As a designated Local Nature Reserve, St Denis' is home to cave spiders and bats, who share a building with no electricity, running water or vehicle access.

The churchyard is still consecrated – you can be buried there if you wish. It's also a County Wildlife Site, active with badgers, foxes, moles, ants, birds and a whole range of wild flowers.

Having locked the doors in 1959, what followed was inevitable: the building started to decay and by 2002 high winds and stupendous overgrowth of ivy 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 – it was listed as Grade II* and as the ultimate guardians of listed buildings in south Cambridgeshire, it had no alternative but to agree to restore the building to at least a 'safe shell' (which I had a small hand in achieving).

Removing the ivy in early 2003 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 had affected the integrity of both the roof and the walls, leaving many loose tiles and much of the wall's flint facing decayed.

Girding their loins, the good councillors at SCDC agreed to restoration work; some £150,000 and nearly three years later, its roof had been re-tiled (with 'proper' clay tiles) and the timbers and stonework repaired or replaced – thanks to the expert craftsmen of Haymills Conservation and funding from SCDC, English Heritage and Hatley Parish Council. Sadly, there wasn't enough money for a new floor, windows or, indeed, any restoration work inside, so the doors remain locked.

While from outside and inside St Denis' still looks and feels like a church, it was, in 2011 and 2012, used for two Taizé services, revealing the one thing no one had experienced for over 50 years: its wonderful acoustic.

Since 2006, when the work was completed, a local management team has kept an eye on the building and ensured the churchyard is kept relatively tidy.

When the FoFC does finally become its guardian, what next for the Church of St Denis?

It is hoped work can be started this year on the basics: installing a floor and putting in windows (paid for by a dowry from SCDC and funds raised by people in Hatley and the Parish Council) – and, hopefully not too far down the line, restore the inside to something Butterfield would recognise.



▲ St Denis', East Hatley in 2003, covered in ivy and in danger of collapse.

▼ St Denis' June 2015: a handsome church, soon to be given to the Friends of Friendless Churches for safeguarding in perpetuity.

