

The Church of St Denis, East Hatley

by Peter Mann / updated with help from Nicola Jenkins, July 2017

Origins St Denis' church in East Hatley, Cambridgeshire, dates from 1217. It was substantially restored in 1874 by William Butterfield, the noted 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 transferred to South Cambridgeshire District Council.

SCDC gave St Denis' to the Friends of Friendless Churches on 30th November 2016 – it became the first Butterfield church in their portfolio of, now, 47 churches.

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

The churchyard is still consecrated (and owned by the diocese) – you can be buried here if you wish. It's also a County Wildlife Site, active with badgers, foxes, moles, ants, birds and a whole range of wild flowers, including oxslips, bee orchids and quaking grass.

Decline and decay Having locked the doors in 1959, the inevitable followed: the building started to decay and by 2002 high winds and a stupendous overgrowth of ivy 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 affected the integrity of both the roof and the walls, leaving many loose tiles and much of the wall's flint facing decayed.

Regeneration By early 2006, 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 £150,000 of 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.

The Local Nature Reserve Management Group keeps an eye on the building and ensures the churchyard is kept relatively tidy.

Its future In June 2017 FoFC applied for planning permission to do the basics: installing a floor and windows in the nave, replacing the door in the north porch and making minor repairs – paid for by a £60,000 dowry from SCDC and funds raised by local residents, Hatley Parish Council and Gamlingay and Hatley Parochial Church Council.

Now the FoFC is its guardian, St Denis' future is looking bright. Hopefully, and not too far down the line, there will be funds to restore the inside to something Butterfield would recognise. Two Taizé services held in 2011 and 2012 revealed the wonderful acoustics of the building.

Hatley Parish Council is open to event ideas to be held in this special church.



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

▼ St Denis' church today – a handsome building now owned by the Friends of Friendless Churches, which is safeguarding it in perpetuity.



More on the Hatley website –
www.hatley.info/about/churches/churches.htm
Friends of Friendless Churches –
www.friendsoffriendlesschurches.org.uk
Hatley Parish Council –
hatley-parish-clerk@hatley.info