

The church of St Denis, East Hatley

Text and photos by Peter Mann

St Denis' church in East Hatley, Cambridgeshire, dates to 1217; most of the surviving medieval elements are from the 1500s. It was restored in the 17th century by Sir George Downing (Downing Street in London is named after him) and again two hundred 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 – it became the first church with a Butterfield connection in its portfolio of (now) 60 churches.

Having locked the doors in 1959, what followed was inevitable: the building started to decay and by 2002 high winds and a stupendous overgrowth of ivy (top photo) 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 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 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 restoration work; some £150,000 and nearly three years later, the 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, Historic England and Hatley Parish Council.

Sadly, there wasn't enough money for a new floor, windows or, indeed, any restoration work inside, so the doors remained locked.



▲ 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.



Since 2006, when the work was finished, a local management team has kept an eye on the building and also ensures the churchyard is kept tidy.

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.

Sir George Downing carried out major restoration work in the 1660s / 1670s when he lived in and owned East Hatley, adding a porch to the south door – but possibly spending more on the splendid cartouche of his coat of arms above the door to tell visitors of his new-found aristocratic connections.

In 1874 William Butterfield made extensive 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 the 'go-to' church architect (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: in the nave, apart from two or three obvious signs of Butterfield's restoration – the stove he installed and the still as-new looking font – a visitor from 1322 would feel at home, only wondering, perhaps, what happened to the brightly coloured walls and rough benches of their day; they might even like the new floor and windows installed by the FoFC in 2018 and (in the chancel) in 2021, including the wonderful head by Alexander Gibbs pictured above.

They might also admire the quality of the new plaster in the nave and other repairs carried out in 2022 which enable the church to be **open every day from around 8.30 am to dusk** to look around or for quiet contemplation – and, at some point, for events.

This is entirely thanks to the FoFC as its guardian. One final task – as funds (or grants) permit – is the installation of a new east window.

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, orchids and Star of Bethlehem.

St Denis' is home to cave spiders and bats which share a building with no electricity, running water or vehicle access.



▲ The smart Downing plaque of his arms (on the left) impaled with those of Frances Howard, his wife, over the south door.

▼ A piece of stained glass rescued from the old east window and now incorporated in a new window in the chancel of St Denis'.

