

Under your feet

Cave spiders are lurking beneath St Denis'

Words Nicola Jenkins / photos John O'Sullivan

Based on the article published in the Friends of Friendless Churches' magazine, May 2024

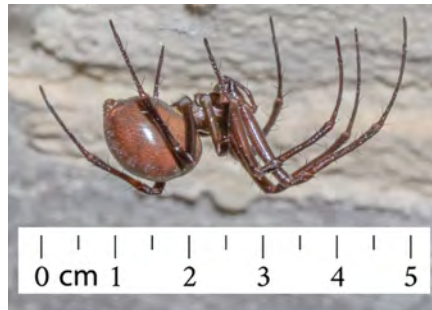
A small and damp furnace chamber beneath your feet here in St Denis' church is providing a perfect home for a population of cave spiders, *Meta bourneti*.[†]

They came from a colony which Rob Mungovan, then South Cambridgeshire District Council's Ecology Officer, discovered in a WWII air raid shelter in 2006 while he was surveying an area close to the old Papworth hospital.

At the time, it was the only known colony of these spiders in Cambridgeshire. As the shelter was going to be demolished and the spiders needed a naturally damp chamber, where better for them to go and live undisturbed than here?

As one of Britain's largest spiders, with a leg span of up to 5 cm and a large and glossy dark chestnut coloured abdomen, *Meta bourneti* are unlikely to cause arachnophobia as they move around so slowly.

The female lays many eggs in a round white silk ball, suspended on silk threads from the chamber wall.



The young 'spiderlings', attracted by light, leave their place of birth, 'balloon' into the air and are blown along on the wind to colonise new areas.

In June 2020, John O'Sullivan, a former East Hatley resident, climbed down the steep, narrow steps into the chamber.[†] He counted 12 adult female cave spiders and six egg sacs, before taking the superb photos shown above and overleaf.

Formerly an employee of the RSPB in Sandy, John says he's more used to pointing his camera at birds, but the cave spiders have their own special kind of charm.

In May 2021, I found an adult female cave spider under a drain cover in my front garden. There must be many others round the village, so Hatley is playing its part in nature recovery.

St Denis' is a Grade II* listed church, last used in 1959. The district council took it on in 1985, removed the dense covering of ivy in 2002, which had all but destroyed the building, and restored the shell.

In 2016 church was transferred to the Friends of Friendless Churches who lovingly restored its interior, allowing it to be open every day for visitors. It has no electricity, running water or vehicular access.

The churchyard is still consecrated and owned by the Diocese of Ely. It is a Local Nature Reserve and County Wildlife Site.

With a moat on one side and fields, meadows and an ancient woodland nearby, the churchyard is an unusually peaceful place.

Badgers, deer and foxes visit; the churchyard has a large variety of wild flowers including Star of Bethlehem, snowdrops, orchids, primroses and an abundance of cowslips.

A local management team keeps an eye on the building and ensures the churchyard is kept tidy.



Meta bourneti – a female cave spider with her egg sac.



Cave spider with beetle prey.



St Denis'
church



St Denis'
nature reserve



FoFC
donations



St Denis'
award winner

[†] The furnace chamber is kept locked.