

The Friends of St Peter's Church, Marefair, Northampton

Patron: Lady Juliet Townsend, LVO

Annual Report, May 2011

During the last twelve months, the Friends have made considerable progress working in conjunction with the Churches Conservation Trust. The Trust has not been immune from the public expenditure cuts which the government has imposed to deal with the national economic situation. It has made the difficult choice of reducing the number of its regions from four to three; our region, the Midlands, has disappeared and we are now in the South East. We have therefore sadly lost our regional director, Sheila Stone, who was a great supporter of St Peter's. We are very grateful for the contribution that Sheila made to the ongoing work here.

The Trust is seeking to concentrate its resources on "front line" services and, indeed, it was their appointment in May 2010 of Chana Bedford as Development Officer, based at St Peter's, that has been the catalyst for the increased activity at the church. Chana, supported by members of the Friends committee, has been indefatigable in gaining TV, radio and press coverage of St Peter's events and history. She has recruited a body of new, mainly youthful, volunteers, who reinforce the stalwarts who joined earlier.

The extra manpower has enabled the church opening to be increased from the two days a week of 2009, to four days in 2010, and from April this year to five days, 10am to 4pm. Our visitors come from all over the world and for all sorts of reasons. Many come because of family links, some are lovers of fine art and architecture, others are drawn by historical and intellectual connections, still more come to sense the numinous ambience or just to pray. We are grateful to the Ibis Hotel and to the Old Black Lion Inn for the valuable facilities that they make available to visitors and volunteers.

The Friends' committee saw some changes in July 2010. The chairman and hon. Treasurer were confirmed in post, a new position of membership secretary was created and filled by Bob Tilson, while Robert Webb became hon. Secretary. A new committee member, Jean Hawkins, together with John Dickie, took on the task of jointly organising concerts, talks and other events. The Friends website www.fostp.org.uk has proved a valuable means of publicising Friends' activities.

We have staged seven concerts in the last year. In July we welcomed Duo Boreas (cello and guitar) and, at the end of the month, the Junge Marburger Philharmonie as part of the exchange programme between Northampton and Marburg. Kosmos, the string trio, and Milos Milivojevic, the accordionist, came in September. As part of the St Ragener week, the Swarbrick Singers performed in November. In the bitter cold of December, the Prince of Wales Rattlers put on a mediaeval folk concert. This year we have had a return visit by Kosmos in April (with sponsorship from Paul Hobden Associates) and a concert by members of the Northamptonshire Music and Performing Arts Service playing clarinets and saxophones. All the concerts have been enthusiastically received by their audiences, many of whom were visiting St Peter's for the first time.

The Friends supported the Churches Conservation Trust Tea Party in June and made a very enjoyable excursion to St Peter and St Paul church, Nether Heyford, in July. We participated in the four day Heritage Weekend opening of the church in September, and once again about 400 visitors were recorded.

On 16th November, a workshop was held in the chancel of St Peter's to discuss research into the life and cult of St Ragener. 20 people attended and there was a lively discussion and an agreement to pursue further study. An evensong was held on St Ragener's day, 21st November, led by the choir of Abington Parish church and their rector, Rev Philip Ball preached a sermon on early English saints.

In consultation with the Ven. Christine Allsopp, Archdeacon of Northampton, the Friends have undertaken the repair and restoration of the churchyard gates. The gates had degenerated with wear and tear and could no longer be securely closed. The refurbished gates will be lockable and it is hoped that undesirable activity in the churchyard will be curtailed.

It was with great regret that, in January, the committee received the resignation of Dr Alan Horsley. Alan's contribution to the deliberations of the committee over the last three years has been enormous, and the visits he led to Stowe and Nether Heyford were greatly appreciated. We are very grateful to him.

The Friends membership is once again increasing and is now around 50. A new student membership subscription of £3 has been introduced in an attempt to harness the energy and enthusiasm of the young. In future, unless more grants can be obtained, our concert programme will need to break even financially. There are possibilities for increasing audience size through greater community involvement and offers of sponsorship would be most welcome. We would like to encourage more local musicians and other performers to take advantage of the wonderful atmosphere that St Peter's offers.

Proposals for updating the Friends' constitution and for extending further the range of our activities and interests are under active discussion: historical research, conservation projects, musical and dramatic performances, visits to places of interest are amongst the items on the agenda. Working with the Churches Conservation Trust and its volunteers, the Friends have an exciting future.

