



A friendship which sustains

An introduction to The Friends of St Matthew's Harwell Oxfordshire, England

A scheme of financial support for an ancient church building in one of the most beautiful and thriving villages in the south of Oxfordshire

St Matthew's Church Harwell

Outstanding heritage value

St Matthew's is a Church of England parish church about 12 miles south of Oxford, UK. It is 'listed' Grade I - that is to say, it is registered as a building of outstanding heritage value by the UK Government's Department of Culture, Media and Sport. It is testament to the generations of volunteers who have lovingly tended the church and its noteworthy architectural features that, though ancient, it continues in daily use for the thriving village community at whose heart it stands.

An ancient building

There was some form of worshipping community in the area from the 7th Century. Harwell village was first recorded in AD985 and work to formalise a church building, on a small incline around 200 feet above sea level, was started in 1190. A tower was added in the early 1200s, the porch and walls reconstructed between 1275 and 1325 and, in 1975, the church was made fit for modern purposes, with an extension housing an office, two meeting rooms and bathroom and kitchen facilities.



The heart of village life

St Matthew's hosts many physical memorials to village families, some as benefactors to the church,



others recording life events. Residents who were lost in the two World Wars are named on dedicated memorials. It is approximately 150 years since anyone has been buried in the churchyard which surrounds the church: headstones which were salvaged from crumbling graves in the 1930s now line the public footpaths across the churchyard. Many were so weathered that they were not legible even 80 years ago.

Harwell war veterans

The current cemetery is about 300 feet away from St Matthew's. It also contains 66 Second World War burials, the majority of them of servicemen from the Royal Air Force Station at Harwell (from which the D-Day gliders flew in June 1944). These memorials, in a quiet garden plot overlooking farmland, are tended by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

The Harewell window

One of the most striking family references inside St Matthew's is the East window of the North aisle which dates from around 1280 and has an example of the more advanced tracery c1300-1325 which used ogee curves and intersecting mullions. This window is now known as the Harewell window as the descendants of John de Harewell, 1320-1386, donated the cost of having the window restored and additional stained glass added in 1981.

John de Harewell

The coat of arms of John de Harewell is set right at the centre of the window. John was born in the village, the son of a freeholder, and having studied at Oxford University he became a priest. In the service of the Black Prince (Edward, the eldest son of King Edward III of England and father to King Richard II of England), he rose to become Governor of Aquitaine in southwest France during the Hundred Years War and finally Bishop of Bath and Wells in the English West Country. A stone effigy lies on his table tomb in Wells Cathedral. The fascinating story in America is traced by a descendant from Texas, Jan Whittaker, in the booklet "The Harwell Trail".¹



Harewell descendents

John de Harewell as a priest had no children, but there is traceable direct lineage to his brother, Roger (d.1390), who married an heiress from Warwickshire. Several branches of the family were known in the early 17th Century in Coventry, Wolverhampton, Worcester, Evesham (all in the English Midlands) and Suffolk.

Roger's descendent Thomas Foulk Harewell (b.1606) abandoned the impoverished family home at Besford, near Worcester, and sailed with his brother in 1636 as colonists to Virginia, from where

the family eventually spread across the southern states of the USA.

There is a great deal more to the architectural history of St Matthew's Church which can be found on our church website: harwellandchiltonchurches.org.uk or in a detailed booklet which can be posted.

Historic registers

Registers of baptisms, marriages and burials are kept to this day for public inspection (although not necessarily at St Matthew's - the oldest - which date back to 1558 - are in the regional Records Office).

Friends' Contributions

Volunteers

Volunteers have maintained the church through the generations. In recent centuries their work has been influenced by legislation governing the maintenance standards of public buildings of any age: accommodating, for example, health and safety or disability access requirements in a building over 800 years old has clearly taken particular professional input as well as considerable creative vision!

Nevertheless the spirit of stewarding the building as a gift by the church family to the village still applies.



Buildings Committee

The structure through which recommendations for large projects on the church building are made is common to that of all Church of England parish churches: a Buildings Committee of volunteers reports to the Parochial Church Council (PCC - the elected leadership team of the church including members 'from the pews', Churchwardens and other lay Church officials, and chaired by the Rector).

At St Matthew's we are blessed with a Buildings Committee all of whose members have direct professional experience of construction or interior decoration or major project management expertise.

Improvements

The Buildings Committee also oversees energy efficiency measures and the use of audio-visual equipment in St Matthews.

Lighting was replaced and heating updated in 1999, an updated audio system including hearing aid loop installed in 2004 and a digital audio-visual projection system installed in 2013. These large-scale changes and other improvements, funded by public subscription within the village of Harwell, have brought the church acclaim as a sought-after concert venue. We charge no hire for the church, but do seek donations to cover costs such as heating and lighting. Other income from the church derives from offerings during services ('loose alms'), regular tax-efficient giving by church members, occasional legacies and hire of the associated purpose build St Matthew's Church Hall, dedicated in 1994.

Why a Friends Scheme?

On average St. Matthew's needs about £18,000² per annum to cover the cost of repairs, maintenance and improvements. This is not evenly spread: for example in 2007, £60,000 had to be raised rather quickly for replacing the (leaking!) lead roof of the tower and other essential repairs. In the past church members themselves, aided occasionally by ad hoc contributions from other villagers, have been able to cover the costs and the other work required. This, though, is getting more difficult as costs rise with increasing professional requirements - for example, health and safety rules mean that expensive scaffoldings rather than ladders are needed for access to internal and external roofs (the cross beams in the nave are 20 feet off the ground and the tower is 60 feet high) - and the pressures of modern life reduce the time available for voluntary work.

Friendship which sustains

It would therefore now be very helpful to have a Friends of St. Matthew's Scheme that provides a steady and predictable income which will not only preserve the current fabric of the church, but will allow it to adapt, as it has done over centuries, to new uses at the centre of the community it serves.

Widening the circle

The Friends scheme would enable non-parishioners or non-churchgoers within the parish to complement the affection for the church which is held by many who attend regular worship - affection shown by considerable investments of volunteering and funds. The personal thoughts of just one who speaks for many are added at the end of this brochure as an illustration.



How the money is held

Donations to the Friends' scheme, whether one-off or regular, are held in a 'restricted fund' within the church accounts. Donors may be assured that this fund can only be spent on the building or fabric of St Matthew's Church. Kindly note that whilst our website name references our sister church in the village of Chilton about two miles away, accounts are held separately.

Treasurer

The Church Treasurer is a member of the PCC and is usually, as currently (2014), a qualified Accountant who seeks the best, no-risk, return on savings over a clutch of account opportunities.

The annual accounts are audited by an Independent Examiner, are available for public view in our Annual Report which is available from the end of April each year as hard copy (see 'contact us' section) or on the website harwellandchiltonchurches.org.uk. Friends of St Matthew's will automatically receive an e-copy of the Annual Report and Accounts unless they state that they wish not to.



St Matthew's Church is registered with the Charity Commission, the national charities regulator. Its registration number is 1158861.

Ways of giving

We welcome any gift, large or small, one-off or regular.

One-off donations should be made by Banker's Draft via NatWest Plc, sort code 60-06-36, account number 73421197 (IBAN GB60 NWBK 6006 3673 4211 97) for the credit of 'Harwell St Matthew's PCC'. They can also be made via MyDonate, a link to which can be found at <http://hcchurches.org/finances>.

To set up regular giving, please use the same account details.

Anonymity & acknowledgement

In both cases it would be helpful if you would tell us your plans (see 'contact us' section) so that we can reconcile incoming donations to their donor and acknowledge your gift as you would wish.

For example, whilst sums are recorded in the annual accounts, this is detailed as an annual aggregate. Friends' names are not named individually. However, donors, but not sums, will be named in a dedicated section of our website unless anonymity is preferred (please do let us know if you wish your name to be withheld).

Keeping up to date

We would like to keep you up to date with work at St Matthew's by sending you the Annual Report (April each year) and, of course, welcoming you for a tour of the building at any time you are visiting the UK. Allow yourself a few hours to do this and we would be delighted to show you more of south Oxfordshire including finding a suitably English Cream Team or rustic inn somewhere along the way!

Befriending St Matthew's Harwell: A Personal Reflection

My name is Tony Hughes and I am Chairman of the Buildings Committee. We look after the church building on behalf of the Parochial Church Council.

I have lived in Harwell for 45 years after coming to work in the area as a scientist. Until about fifteen years ago I had little interest in old buildings and my experience of looking after them was confined to keeping our house in order – some of it dates from the 17th Century. Then in 1998 the Rector persuaded me to join the Buildings Committee. I realise now that this might have been a cunning ploy to line me up as the next Chairman, to which I succumbed a year or so later. The first two tasks I had to take up were rather contrasting: to recommend changes to make the church more accessible to people with disabilities, and to eradicate an attack on timbers in the tower by death watch beetles.

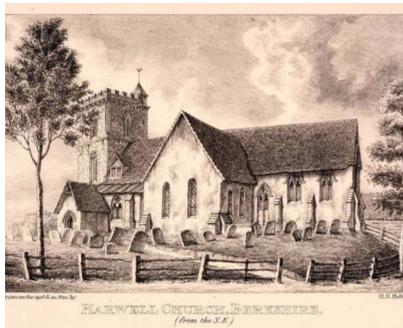
I have learned a lot since then and have come to appreciate the value of this ancient building to our community. There are many similar medieval churches throughout Oxfordshire and indeed throughout the whole of Great Britain. So what is special about St. Matthew's?

Most importantly, as a place of worship it is one of the most thriving village churches in this part of the country. We have a vibrant church membership and every Sunday (and on other occasions too) the church is filled with people fulfilling the purpose for which it was built 900 years ago. But it is also a church that has been well preserved.

Since a major restoration around 1860 we have been fortunate that many people have devoted a lot of time and effort to keep it in good shape. It does though need continuous care; there is always something that needs doing to make sure that small problems do not develop into big problems and that the occasional unexpected problem is dealt with. I am very conscious that this is becoming more precarious as fewer people now have the time and skills to 'do it yourself' and many tasks these days require expensive professional input to satisfy statutory requirements. Gone are the days when many of the men in the village worked locally as artisans and turned their hand to similar jobs on the church at the end of their normal working day.

So we need all the help that we can get to support our own efforts and to make sure that this lovely building is still there when we have gone, and is kept up and developed so that it can continue to be very much the heart and soul of Harwell.

The village has been here for a thousand years and the church for nearly all of that time. Widening our circle of Friends of St. Matthew's could really make a difference to its future. To have that extra support would be wonderful.



The picture on the left dates from 1843; the one on the right is a recent photo. The building hopefully will still retain its appearance in another 150 years, but there are a few differences to spot that show that it is not just a piece of history!

Contact us

If you would like to talk to someone about the scheme or to make a donation straight away, please contact

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Footnotes

1. "The Harwell Trail" by John Fletcher and Jan Whittaker, copyrighted and published by the authors, 1981, and currently out of print.
2. At the time of writing, over \$30,000.