

Case Study

All Saints' Church Bisham Friends Scheme

BCF

Robert Frost, Chairman, Bisham Church Friends

Our aim is to promote a shared sense of community, both locally and universally, centred on a beautiful historic building in a peaceful Thames-side setting. Anyone interested in this special place, wherever they live and whether or not they are church-goers, is welcome to join.



All Saints' Church Bisham dates from the 12th Century, with several later additions, most notably the Elizabethan Hoby Chapel, originally linked to Bisham Abbey. It contains monuments and stained glass of significant importance.

The church is a special historic place, in an idyllic peaceful location beside the Thames, on the Berkshire side of the river, within walking distance of Marlow. It is one of a team of four churches in the parish, each with its own District Church Council (DCC) and accounts, under the umbrella of the Parochial Church Council.

Why did you decide to start a Friends scheme?

The Bisham Church congregation has aged and dwindled over the years. Its electoral roll now stands at 66 and numbers in the parish as a whole fell by 15% between 2018 and 2019. Meeting the Parish Share has become difficult. However, the church offers opportunity as a community resource; there is no other community centre in the village of Bisham and the church's historic treasures are unmatched in the Marlow area. A successful Friends scheme was seen as a way of ensuring the future of the church itself.

How did you structure the scheme alongside the DCC?

In 2014, together with our Team Vicar and the Secretary/Treasurer of the DCC, I attended a Friends scheme training day arranged by the Oxford Diocese. Two options were discussed: setting up a separate charity or forming a sub-group within the DCC. We chose the latter for two reasons. A separate charity would have necessitated an extra group of trustees, separate legal obligations and additional layers of administration, when attracting volunteers, even for the DCC itself, was becoming increasingly difficult. More important, however, was our belief that the Friends scheme should be firmly anchored within the ecclesiastical side of the church. The Terms of Reference which we drew up reflect this.

How did you encourage new givers?

I do not share the assumption that a Friends scheme should be established primarily to raise funds, although in my experience money will follow naturally. The community aspect, which in our case now extends well beyond the local area, even as far as the USA and Australia, is more important. We even offer free membership, with the opportunity to give time and to become involved in various ways, which leads to growth.

How do you encourage non-congregation members to join?

This is a key question. Initially it meant extensive networking and personal contact, identifying those for whom Bisham Church might have special meaning, for example those who had relatives buried in the churchyard, those who had been married there, those who once worshipped there, those who had strong community feeling and, above all, those who wished to ensure the future of a building and place that they valued. While this networking is ongoing, it is time consuming, so we have automated joining through our new website www.bishamchurchfriends.org, which should attract younger members familiar with smartphones, links and QR codes. It is early days but we are encouraged by the way automatic joining is taking off. Already two-thirds of our Friends are non-congregation members and the proportion is bound to increase.



How does the Friends scheme fit in with the church's normal giving?

This is another important question. Since the majority of the Friends are not congregation members, and many are not church-goers, a system had to be found that did not conflict. Those Friends who already support the church financially as members of the congregation may make a small additional donation directly to the Friends scheme if they wish, but they are under no obligation to do so. Their membership in itself provides the essential link mentioned above. We do not wish other Friends to feel obliged to contribute to the running of the church as an ecclesiastical entity, so we have avoided the centralised Diocesan donation scheme and established a distinct Friends fund, with a separate bank account. This is mainly used for the maintenance of the building and its contents.

How is the money from the Friends scheme spent?

A small proportion covers administration, publicity and marketing, with maintenance of the website and occasional printing consuming most of this. The bulk of the money raised is transferred into a ring-fenced fund, restricted to the maintenance of the fabric. Commitments are approved by the DCC. This takes pressure off the small congregation no longer able to guarantee the preservation of a relatively large building, of great value to the wider community but now disproportionate for solely ecclesiastical use.

How much does it cost to be a Friend?

While acknowledging that defined subscription rates might have been the way to go, we have decided to leave it to Friends to donate whatever they wish. As explained above, free membership is possible, while we recognise that some Friends already donate to the church in other ways. Most Friends do donate to the scheme, usually on a regular basis, and their generosity is greatly appreciated.



Do you run events? If so, what kind are they?

We offer between two and four events a year, details of which are given on the website. These include historical talks, guided tours, social events and outside visits. They are generally open to anyone, although occasionally we hold an event restricted to Friends, to show gratitude for their contribution. The open events are sometimes ticketed. At other times, discretionary donations generally cover the modest costs. Sometimes non-members go on to join the scheme.

How do you keep up interest in the scheme?

In addition to running events, we are committed to producing a biannual illustrated newsletter. We believe this to be a useful platform for sustaining interest, appreciated by members, who receive it first by email before it is posted on the website for anyone to read. The website has considerable potential, not only for sustaining interest amongst present members but also for attracting new members of all ages, wherever they live. The ability to include links presents great opportunity, which we are in the early stages of developing.

What is the greatest problem that you face?

I like to see problems as solutions in disguise. To sustain the Bisham Church Friends scheme, we need to identify volunteers who share our vision and are enthusiastic about supporting our aim, willing to give time, experience and expertise. All volunteering can bring unexpected rewards and this worthwhile activity is no exception.

Robert Frost

Chairman

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www.bishamchurchfriends.org

