

Talk from Kate Jackson, chair of the Friends of St Clement's, Outwell

I think I should start off by saying that I never had any intention of joining a Friends Group, let alone establishing one. Having lived in my village for almost 30 years I had only been in the church a handful of times for our local primary school events.

However, a chance encounter in a supermarket car park was to change this. Just as I was getting in my car to leave, I bumped into a friend, and we started talking. I asked her what she was up to, and she said she was doing quite a lot of work with the PCC. 'What's that?' I asked - my first and most serious mistake. She explained what it was and how they needed to raise matching funds for a project they were undertaking. To be honest, I glazed over a bit at this point, as I wasn't particularly interested in the detail. I made some throw-away remark like 'I'm sure lots of people are happy to help'. No, she said, there weren't many people who wanted to help and the grant giving body was fairly insistent that a Friends Group should be established. For reasons unknown she thought I might be just the person for the job.

I said that I was sure that I wasn't, explaining that I was agnostic. 'Oh, that's even better' she said, 'because we need someone who is interested in the building, not the spiritual aspect of its work'. I then said (my second mistake) 'I'll think about it' and made good my escape. The next morning Janet rang me - she had arranged a meeting with the church warden. I went along and agreed rather reluctantly that I was prepared to try and set the group up for them, but once it was established and a chair elected, I would withdraw from the group. That was 10 years ago, and I am still the chair.

I honestly did not have a clue where to start. Firstly, I had to find out what the actual project was. Not so easy when you don't speak the language. By this I mean words like nave, hammer beam roof, the north aisle, south aisle, east windows, the QI, the parvis room, and initially, when told we were to enter an interregnum, I thought it was part of the church building. None of this was part of my daily vocabulary and if I'm honest I'm still often checking where the sun sets to work out which part of the church people are talking about.

After a short introduction to the outline of the project I realised this wasn't going to be a quick fix situation. There were 2 major issues. One was that major roof repairs were required on this medieval building, plus some very rare wood carvings that were part of the internal roof structure had also been identified and they appeared to be infested with death watch beetle. Water was coming through the roof at times and masonry was often found on the floor.

We decided that the first step should be to try and get people into the church, the number on the electoral roll being about 16 at the time. In my experience the prospect of some cheese and wine usually encourages people and experts with an interest in the building had said that they would be happy to do presentations regarding the unique value of the carvings. I called upon friends and neighbours to offer some support, but I wasn't confident that we would draw a crowd. But come the night much to my surprise a whole group of people turned up, including Bishop David and academics who were interested in ancient buildings. However, the majority of people there were not church goers so I focussed rather heavily on what would happen if the church wasn't repaired, namely it would probably fall into disrepair and be boarded up, and no doubt

vandalised. As the church is in the very centre of the village it would not attract newcomers and would certainly affect property prices. This outcome was not desirable for anyone. As the meeting came to an end I asked if anyone interested in becoming a Friend would stay behind. Surprisingly about 10 people stayed and all expressed interest in joining the group. Ten years later five of the original volunteers are still members.

I realised at this point that it was important to have on board the people who were already friends to the church. The lady who did the cleaning, the 92 year old who polished the brasses every week, the members of the PCC who organised fund raising lunches and a weekly coffee shop, another member of the congregation who did the beautiful church flowers and Janet who had caught me in the car park and was amazing at maintaining contact with anyone who showed any interest in the church and drawing them in to the fundraising initiative.

When we had our first meeting, we discussed in general terms what the Friends Group would be for and whether anyone would be happy to take on a specific role once the group was formed. This meeting went surprisingly well. We agreed that the Friends would work with the PCC to raise funds for the works that were required. Individuals volunteered for the posts that needed to be filled: a treasurer, a membership secretary, and a secretary. Alas no hands went up for the post of chair, but I felt there was potential in the group for a chair to emerge.

We had taken the contact details of all the people who came along that evening, and we quickly contacted them with membership forms. Much to our surprise we had a good response and raised about £15,000 in the first year. Some donors wanted reassurance that the money they had donated would not be spent on 'experts' who would write reports that would never result in actions. The Friends and PCC have always been very aware that people are trusting them with their donations and always aim to spend them wisely.

The situation in the church was unusual when the Friends group was established. The vicar was about to retire and there was no one to take his place. Since then, the post has been filled on a temporary basis but there has not been anyone who wanted to take the lead on getting the funds necessary for the work. The PCC was keen to make progress but were not keen to become involved with applying for grants. Having taken advice they discovered that they could nominate someone to act on their behalf and I agreed to do this for them. Funnily enough I like applying for grants, I get much pleasure from success no matter how small the amount we are given. I have learnt that grant giving bodies are usually very helpful and we have had a lot of support and advice from Scilla Latham, the secretary at Norfolk Country Churches.

Over the years the Friends and PCC have raised in the region of £55,000 from events and donations and approximately £271,000 in grants from 9 different charities. There are a lot of grant giving bodies around and they like to help.

People often ask how the Friends get on with the PCC. To be honest there has never been a problem. We have the same goal, and we work together to achieve the desired outcomes. It is important to play to people's strengths, some people have more time to

give than others. As I said earlier there are friends who do not want to join groups or be on committees, but they will happily help in the coffee shop and welcome visitors.

Things don't always go smoothly and it is important to keep your sense of humour. I remember one occasion when it was agreed that new pew cushions were a priority. A local upholsterer was extremely helpful. We had just had some new chairs in the coffee shop, so I matched the fabric with the blue one on the chairs. The upholsterer spent a lot of time, matching the fabric and getting a good price for us. When I showed the fabric to the PCC, they said that it was the wrong colour, it should have been red. 'But the chairs are blue' I replied. They had been donated was the reply, so there was no choice but where there was a choice, ours was a 'red' church. So, it was back to the drawing board on that one.

Sometimes raising funds isn't always the primary objective. The PCC and Friends have been running a cake stall for some time and queries have been raised as to whether it is a good business model. Baking good cakes is expensive and it is probably true to say that if all the bakers donated what they spent on the ingredients and didn't bake the cakes there wouldn't be much difference in the money raised. However the stall brings people into the church, they are made welcome and often stop for a coffee and everyone feels this is to be encouraged.

Sometimes it is easy to feel discouraged. On one occasion having just completed a repair and restoration of a stained-glass window which had been a major undertaking, I walked into the church and a visitor said, 'you need to get that broken glass repaired.' Overnight pigeons had got into the church and flown into the glass of another window and broken three small panes of glass – one step forward...

Over the 10-year period, we have supported the PCC on several major projects, including emergency roof repairs (it no longer leaks), the installation of a toilet and utility room, valuable stained-glass windows have been repaired and restored, medieval chests and a Jacobean table have been restored.

As for future plans, the church is now on the at-risk register and we are about to start on a new campaign for more roof repairs and conservation of the carvings, as well as a long-term project of developing the church as a community asset.

What affected has this had on me? I'm now fiercely protective of the church, I want it to be safe, well looked after and valued by local people. When we have concerts, I often think how people have sung and celebrated major life events in the building for over 700 years and it deserves to be cherished and saved.

Finally, thanks to Holly Robinson and Geoffrey Hunter for their on-going support and encouragement and to Sam Pedlar for organising this event.