

Oxfordshire Historic Churches Trust (2016)

Draft Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Trust held at Rycote (by kind invitation of Bernard and Sarah Taylor) on Wednesday, 11th September 2024

Bishop Gavin, Bishop of Dorchester and President in the chair.

48 members of the Trust were present.

1 Welcome

Members of the Trust were welcomed to Rycote by our host and patron, Bernard Taylor.

The Bishop of Dorchester thanked all the members of the Trust for attending and the Trustees and office holders for their significant efforts in the course of another excellent year. He thanked Mr and Mrs Taylor for their invitation to hold the annual meeting in the wonderful setting of Rycote.

2 Apologies

Apologies were received from Cynthia Robinson, Elizabeth Knowles, Michael Sibly, Graham Clifton, Deacon Paul O'Connor, Norman Dawson, David Warr, Sir Hugo Brunner, Julia Twynam. Hilary CakebreadHall was caught in heavy traffic and was, in the event, unable to attend.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the 2023 annual meeting in Witney were accepted as a correct record and signed.

4 Chair's Report

Dr Goss reported that looking over another year of the Trust's activities was, as always, a pleasure. He felt that the Trust was in good form and delivering on its mission to protect the county's heritage of churches and chapels.

The strong number of applications demonstrated the importance of the Trust's work. Of special note was the number of volunteers who, entirely in their own time, work to bring about repairs and renovations to their buildings and to improve their usefulness to the community. These volunteers, who typically are not specialists, find ways to obtain technical support, to work through regulatory requirements, and to raise the funds to safeguard treasured buildings. Their work is witnessed by our Area Representatives and by Council members of the Trust who consider the applications.

It was a particular pleasure to host many of our recent grant recipients at our Diamond Jubilee Evensong in the Cathedral.

Funding is at the heart of what we can achieve with those local volunteers. Ride+Stride remains an important source of income as do our investments, subscriptions, donations and legacies. The last of these continue to be key to our work, and we look for them to continue into the future.

There are constant hurdles in our collective work. At the moment the Government is consulting on the VAT-refund scheme for listed places of worship. As Chair, he would write to the Secretary of State arguing strongly for the continuance of this support. (Bishop Gavin and Mr Taylor subsequently offered to add their own support by writing independently.)

Dr Goss reminded members of the programme of events which had taken place in the year and which had been greatly enjoyed. It was a pleasure to welcome to the Trust two new Area Representatives, Graham Collings and Graham Clifton, and a new representative of the Roman Catholic Church, Deacon Paul O'Connor.

Finally, he asked Members to remember Mark Phillips of Wallingford who had recently died aged 86 and had served for many years as Area Representative for Wallingford. Bishop Gavin then led a moment of silence in memory of Mr Phillips.

5 Treasurer's Report

The Treasurer reported that the full picture of the Trust's financial position was set out in the Statutory Report and Accounts posted on the website. The key elements of this picture were of course income, expenditure, and reserves. It was noticeable that the Trust had been able to increase its grants by £90,000 and in the course of the financial year had made new grants well in excess of £500,000. This was part of an agreed policy to reduce the ratio of reserves to expenditure - in line with the expectations of the Charity Commission. This policy and other financial matters were kept under review by the Finance Committee whose advice to the Trustees was particularly valuable.

In response to a question as to the number of applications from Nonconformist churches, Alice Butler the Nonconformist representative on Council pointed out that all recent meetings had included at least one application from a Nonconformist church or chapel. It was clear, however, from the number of closures of Nonconformist buildings that their continuance was under particular pressure.

6/7 Receipt of the report and accounts

The meeting agreed to receive the report and accounts noting that they had been signed off by the auditors, the Chair and the Trustees. Jonathan Scheele proposed and Basil Eastwood seconded the receipt of the report and accounts.

The Treasurer was warmly thanked for his work on behalf of the Trust.

8 Report of the Grants Officer

In Cynthia's unavoidable absence, the Chair referred to her written report which she had provided.

47 grants had been made during the financial year with the total of over £520,000 compared to 38 in the previous year. The maximum grant had been set at £35,000, but where a David Booth Award, was made this was raised to £50,000. Cynthia noted that £61,000 had remained unclaimed during the year and this represented work that could not be started or where its direction had had to change.

In the main, the majority of grants were for roof repairs, avoiding water ingress and other major elements of the church building, e.g. bells, clocks, and organs. The Trust was pleased to see that applications had recovered from the period of the pandemic, for example, seven churches had received grants for installing kitchens and toilets to improve the community potential of the building.

In addition to the major grants, the Trust provided other forms of financial support such as scoping or feasibility grants, top-up grants (where the cost of a project underway rose significantly above the original estimate), and emergency grants which were considered between meetings of Council. The Trust had decided that it will now consider funding routine maintenance, especially where this is required following a Quinquennial.

Dr Goss paid particular thanks to Cynthia for all the work she undertakes. In response to a question, it was noted that while the Trust may garner particular experience, its policy is to leave to other bodies decisions relating to regulation and aesthetics. The Trust can however refer back an element where it thinks further thought might profitably be given; and Area Representatives can and do make comment at an early stage when they visit applicants to hear about their intentions and needs.

In response to a question relating to church access, it was pointed out that the current application process required an indication of when a church was regularly open. The Trust like other bodies, e.g. Ecclesiastical Insurance, encouraged churches to be open as much as possible, but it had to be recognised that an open church, especially in urban areas, could be vulnerable. As a condition of its grant, the NCT requires a church to be open 100 days a year in addition to opening for services. Where churches could not be open if unattended, they could be encouraged to display a notice indicating how a key-holder might be contacted.

The Grants Officer was thanked in her absence for her report and her invaluable work across the year.

8 Ride and Stride Report

Dr. Goss reported on Ride+Stride on behalf of Hilary CakebreadHall. Hilary had noted that the last four Stride events had been outstanding for a particular feature having caused some particular challenge. In 2023, the issue had been the extreme heat of Ride+Stride day. Hilary was particularly grateful to those who had ensured the opening of their churches, and had been ready to welcome visitors - even if, in some cases (especially where the distance between churches was greatest), no-one had arrived because of the extreme weather. Ride+Stride remains an important means of fundraising and publicity for OHCT. The Trust is conscious of the changing profile of participants, and the varying ways in which they complete the exercise. To reflect this and so draw in as many as possible, the Trust promotes a flexible approach to Ride+Stride and has increasingly made use of email, websites, and social media. It was noted that we were just three days away from the 2024 Ride+Stride.

Dr Goss thanked Hilary on the Trust's behalf for her enormous dedication and hard work in coordinating Ride+Stride.

9 Election of President for the year

It having been confirmed that the Bishop of Dorchester would willingly serve a further term as President, Bishop Gavin was elected *nem con* as President for the year 2024-5.

10 AOB

None

The meeting closed at 4.30, after which members were able to visit Rycote Chapel and the Gardens and Park, before gathering again for a reception as guests of the Taylors.