OXFORDSHIRE HISTORIC CHURCHES TRUST (2016)

Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Trust held in Dorchester Abbey (by kind permission of the PCC) on Tuesday, 22 July 2025

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

44 members of the Trust were present.

1 Welcome

The Bishop of Dorchester thanked all the members of the Trust for attending and noted how special it was to be meeting in the shadow of the shrine of St. Birinus. He opened the meeting with prayer.

2 Apologies

Apologies were received from Jonathan and Sarah Scheele, Julia and Jeremy Twynam.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the 2024 annual meeting held at Rycote were accepted as a correct record and subsequently signed.

4 Chair's Report

Dr Stephen Goss reiterated the President's thanks to those who had made the trip to Dorchester and to those who had made the arrangements for hosting the Annual Meeting. As usual a full account of the year's activities was set out in the Annual Review and members were encouraged to pass on copies. It was his privilege as Chair to highlight a number of those activities, in a bumper year with an excellent Ride and Stride, and during which over £600K had been given in grants to support the £3.5 million which the applicant churches and chapels had had to raise for maintenance, restoration and development . He never ceased to be impressed by the dedication shown by individuals and parishes in the face of the demands they faced. The Trust was also glad that it had a fast emergency grant route for use outside the routine grants timetable.

In retrospect, the years post Covid had been a golden period when the Trust had been able deliberately to draw down from its accumulated reserves and make the biggest grant allocations in its history. Inevitably this era was drawing to a close and it was now necessary to match total grant allocation more closely to income. The income from the capital held in the Heritage Fund continued to be a primary source of recurrent funding and potential donors were encouraged to specify gifts and legacies for the Heritage Fund. This would sustain the Trust's long-term capacity to support its activities. As always he was immensely grateful to all donors and supporters.

Dr Goss expressed his gratitude for the work of officers – in particular the Vice-Chair, Treasurer and Grants Officer – and the Trustees, especially marking the contribution made by Dr Nicola Coldstream whose term as a Trustee was now finishing. Her experience and advice had been of great assistance to the Trust's work. Succession planning was clearly vital to the Trust, and he could announce the arrival of George Wingfield Digby as successor to the Treasurer, Giles Dessain. Giles' contribution to the Trust's work had been as invaluable as it had always been unstintingly given. There would shortly be vacancies for the Ride and Stride organiser and the Grants Officer – and potential names would be very welcome. Anyone with expertise in publicity and media would also be welcome.

Following last year's appeal for new Area Reps, Graham Collings and Graham Clifton had come forward and had now been joined by Suzy Jepson and Francis Brown to fill vacancies as area reps or alternates. These were replacements for two long-standing area reps – Alison Shaw who was retiring and Norman Dawson who was leaving the area. Both had been invaluable representatives of the Trust and Council members.

Turning to the concern about VAT refunds on church building repairs, which had been a major topic at Rycote, Dr Goss noted that the one-year extension had been welcome but the £25K cap on refunds for individual repair bills less so. Churches with large projects had been particularly hard hit – and with no warning. This situation remained a major source of concern.

Finally Dr Goss referred to the sad death of David Warr whose church tours had been such a feature of the Trust's programme. While these were now being led by others, the loss of David's encyclopaedic knowledge of church buildings and conservation was irreplaceable. He had been a much valued member of Council and latterly a Trustee who would be sorely missed. Another strong supporter and regular attendee at OHCT events whose death had been announced recently – Anne Matthews – was also remembered with gratitude.

After leading a moment of silence and prayer for David and Anne, the President thanked Dr Goss for his report, noting how much of the Trust's work was undertaken by the Chair.

5 Treasurer's Report

Giles Dessain thanked the Chair for his earlier kind words. He had greatly enjoyed his time with OHCT and noted how much the role of Treasurer had developed with the Trust's growing income and consequential levels of grant giving.

As the annual accounts made clear, exceptional allocations had been possible in 2024-25, and this had enabled the required reduction in the ratio of reserves to expenditure. It should remain possible to make hundreds of thousands in annual grants although the Trust was unlikely to repeat its 2024-5 figures.

After a thoroughly rewarding eleven years in office, he noted that annual grants had grown from under £200K to over £560K and investments from £1.4 million to over £6.0 million. It was also illuminating to note the difference in his job brought about by online rather than paper based banking and the virtual disappearance of cheques; less welcome was how often the bank labelled the charity's grants as 'suspect' under its anti-fraud procedures.

Looking ahead to standing down as a Trustee in January 2026, Giles wanted to thank the many people who had assisted in his work, not least fellow officers and members of the Finance Committee.

In answer to a question on the accounts, the fall in the number of unclaimed grants was noted, perhaps reflecting the need for ever careful planning of projects. In answer to the President, the Treasurer confirmed that the Heritage Fund was set up as an endowment fund that could be maintained as a long-term source of income.

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. Giles proposed and Gillian Coates seconded the receipt of the report and accounts.

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

8 Ride and Stride report

Hilary Cakebread Hall began her report by reminding members that Saturday, 14 September 2024 had been a normal day, the first since 2019 to be unaffected by Covid, a monarch's demise, or exceptionally hot weather. Its success had been in large part due to the number of churches which had opened for the Ride and Striders. The on-going discipline of making information available both on our website and by hard copy continued to be important to maximising participation both by churches and participants. Gavin noted he had been sorry to miss the 2024 R+S due to a cycling accident; he had anticipated episcopal duties would also prevent his participation in 2025 but was delighted to confirm he would now be available.

Turning to the future, the biggest challenge faced was the recruitment of new participants; members were asked to spread the message that Ride and Stride could be undertaken in a variety of ways and by a wide variety of groups. The website last year had, for the first time a series of suggested routes for cyclists and walkers, and new routes were now being added, most recently for use within towns where the distances between churches were smaller.

Similar flexibility was maintained for administration, with some participants preferring paper to the growing use of IT. Noting that her time as a trustee also came to an end in January 2026, Hilary described her years with Ride and Stride as particularly interesting as

well as demanding. She was warmly thanked for her huge contribution as R & S County Organiser.

9 Overview of grants in the year

Cynthia Robinson reported that a total of 41 grants was awarded in 2024-5, with the maximum being £50K, one of our David Booth awards, and the minimum £1K. The Annual Review's list of grants showed the majority of churches needed help with repairs – to roofs, towers and stonework with water ingress the main culprit.

Six churches received grants for the installation of WCs and kitchens to enable their churches to be used more frequently by both the congregation and other local groups. After an unsurprising lull, both during and post-Covid in such projects, it has taken the churches time to recover their finances and to be confident enough to move forward with such major expenditure.

Following the Church of England's commitment to achieving a net-zero carbon target by minimising the churches' environmental footprint, the Trust have seen churches (6) applying for support to use energy-efficient lighting and heating. The former utilises LED . The latter looks to replace oil fired systems, when possible, with the installation of under-pew heaters; Herschel halo chandeliers; overhead panel and IR heaters - all intended to direct the heating efficiently to where it is required.

Cynthia noted that whilst many churches, often well known to the Trust, approach OHCT for grants from time to time, it was very satisfying to record that 5 churches, which had applied for the first time, had received grants totalling £130,000.

Cynthia highlighted a number of issues. First, increasingly large and complex projects with high and ever-increasing costs have to be carefully managed; the help of professional advisers is essential here.

Second, unforeseen circumstances occur, particularly with roofs when inspection from the scaffolding sometimes identifies additional work and costs after the project has got underway.

Third, while early OHCT support can encourage other donors and grant bodies to provide further funds, the time taken overall to raise sufficient funds and delays with the appointment of contractors can require revised quotations meaning that costs can rise significantly by the time the work is started.

Finally, the impact of changes to the VAT refund scheme will be a concern for churches, and, if the current scheme is withdrawn altogether, churches will be required to raise even more or to curtail their projects.

To conclude, Cynthia read a small number of the highly appreciative messages from recipient churches. Cynthia was warmly thanked for her report and her invaluable work.

10 Election of President for the year

It having been confirmed that Bishop Gavin would willingly serve a further term as President, he was elected *nem con* President for the year 2025-26.

The Bishop was warmly thanked for his interest in and support for the work of OHCT.

11 AOB

None

Bishop Gavin remembered Bishop Anthony Russell , a former Bishop of Dorchester and later Ely, who had died a few days before.

Formal business closed at 4.50. There followed an informative overview of the history of the Abbey and its buildings by Tim Cook and, after Evensong, a reception kindly arranged by Honor Juniper and her helpers.

The Trust is grateful to the Revd. Jane Willis and PCC for the use of the Abbey.