

OXFORDSHIRE HISTORIC CHURCHES TRUST (2016)

Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Trust held at Ditchley Park (by kind permission of the Ditchley Foundation) on Monday 20 July, 2026

The Bishop of Dorchester, Bishop Gavin Collins, President of the Trust, in the Chair

1. Welcome

The Bishop warmly welcomed some 44 members, officers and friends of the Trust, giving thanks for all the varied contributions which enriched the Trust's service to Oxfordshire. He had regular experience of the value parishes attached to the OHCT grants, and to the Trust's work in promoting them. He paid tribute to the work of officers (in particular the Chair) and also especially welcomed the new trustees.

2. Apologies

Apologies were received from David and Tricia Pritchard, Natalie Merry, Malcolm Airs, and George Wingfield Digby.

3. Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Trust held on Tuesday, 22 July, 2025

The minutes were accepted as a correct record.

4. Matters arising

There were no matters arising.

5. Report from the Chair of Trustees (Dr Stephen Goss)

After thanking the Bishop for his opening remarks, Dr Goss paid particular tribute to the Ditchley Foundation, and to the Lord Lieutenant, Mrs Marjorie Glasgow, a Ditchley Governor, who had facilitated the invitation to hold the meeting in Ditchley House.

In presenting his review of the year, Dr Goss said he would pick up many of the themes covered in the Annual Review, already distributed to those present, and hoped the additional copies circulated could be left in local churches.

Of this year's grant making, the majority had gone to the Anglican churches which constituted the bulk of the medieval, historic buildings in Oxfordshire, and were particularly onerous to maintain. However, the Trustees had been glad to make grants to RC, Methodist, and Baptist churches. Of further satisfaction, parishes were clearly completing their often demanding projects, with only 2.5% of grants returned at the end of the three-year expiry period.

Stephen Slack would shortly report in detail on the grant giving, a task normally fulfilled by Cynthia Robinson who had stepped down from her post formally in January. Welcoming her successor Paul Sandford, Dr Goss paid tribute to the invaluable help Cynthia had provided during the handover.

Turning briefly to finance, Dr Goss noted that the Trust had come to the end of the period when it was making grants at well above its annual income to spend down the significant balanced of funds built up during the pandemic. He would elaborate on this in the financial report. At this stage, his focus was on thanking all those whose generosity and enthusiastic efforts had been essential for the Trust's work.

He then introduced a second new trustee, Dr Linda Monkton, an expert in medieval architecture, and a senior officer of Historic England. Dr Monkton was a trustee in a personal capacity but is close to national policy including the replacement to the Listed Places of Worship VAT refund scheme. Historic England were working on advice to support the introduction of the new scheme which looked likely, at the government's requirement, to focus primarily on churches in areas of particular deprivation.

Dr Goss reminded the meeting that the Trust still needed to find an individual to take over the running of Ride and Stride, a task for which the Trust had been especially grateful to Hilary Cakebread Hall for many years.

Turning to the invaluable work undertaken by Area Representatives and their Alternates, Dr Goss particularly thanked Alison Trowell who had stood down after many years, and those like Francis Brown who had taken on new roles. He often received thanks and praise for the contributions which Area Reps made to potential projects.

Noting the remaining events of the Trust's year, and especially the revised arrangements for the Blenheim Lecture, Dr Goss then asked the meeting to remember those members who had died in 2025-2026, including Richard Lethbridge, Barnabas Brunner, Peter Canon Brooks, and Kate and Liam Tiller. Bishop Gavin remembered them in prayer, including Bishop Anthony Russell, a former Bishop of Dorchester.

6. Overview of grants in the year (*Stephen Slack*)

Mr Slack reported that 37 grants were awarded during the year totalling £350,200: the majority to maintain the fabric of buildings, roofs, towers and stonework, the remainder to development and enhancement projects, such as the restoration of bells, Organs, and tombs. One David Booth award of £35K (in memory of his major legacy to the Trust) went to St Mary, Longworth. Four Oxfordshire churches were helped for the first time.

Following the Trustees' careful revision of the Trust's grant making policy, and in the light of the reduced grant income, the Trust sought to target its support more effectively, distinguishing between projects central to the preservation and enhancement of church buildings, and those which, whilst valuable, were essentially secondary to that.

This re-focusing led to four new principles: first, no more than two main applications per church would be considered over any four-year period, second, the level of assistance would normally be between 10-15% of the costs excluding VAT, up to a maximum of £25K, third, projects would be broadly categorised as those (priority level 1) concerned with preservation and enhancement of the church building, and those (priority level 2) largely focused on furnishings and other 'peripherals'. Finally, the Trust identified a number of factors to help establish the scale of support within these priorities, including the architectural significance of the applicant church and its project, the cost of the proposed work in relation to the parochial resources in money and personnel, its potential value to the worshipping and wider communities, and any form of participation in Ride and Stride.

Confirming that a summary of the revised policy would shortly appear on the Trust's website, Mr Slack reported that Council's initial implementation of the policy appeared to be very positive.

Lastly, he paid warm tribute to the Area Representatives whose outreach and support in developing projects and completing applications provided the principal point of contact between parishes and the Trust. There was widespread support for the developments Mr Slack described.

7. Review of the Trust's finances including Ride and Stride (Chair of Trustees)

Dr Goss, as Chair of the Finance Committee, gave the financial report in the unavoidable absence of the new Treasurer (who was now well settled in his role). A summary of the accounts was to be found in the back cover of the Review and the fully audited report and accounts was posted on the Trust's website. He drew particular attention to the previously higher annual grants made while the Trust was deliberately reducing its reserves of unapplied income, which it was felt had become inappropriately large. Income now remained relatively stable accepting the difficulty of predicting legacies and their attribution to either the Heritage or the General funds. The first of these is the Trust's long-term capital investment with the income used for grants. Allocation to the Heritage Fund is only permitted where it is clear the donor intended that. Dr Goss summarised the three crucial sources of income: investment returns, Ride and Stride, and legacies and donations.

He emphasised that Ride and Stride remains critical to the finances, with the wonderfully energetic and inventive Hilary Cakebread Hall leading Ride and Stride to an overall return of £91K in 2025. She was already greatly missed. Other of Hilary's legacies has been wider use of social media and a persistent effort to reduce the Ride and Stride administration to the minimum. The work of parish Ride and Stride co-ordinators was much appreciated. In one of her final reports, Hilary had noted that participation in Ride and Stride was often seen as involving major activity, and it was important to stress that simply keeping a church open where possible and recording visiting participants (even if only by posting a sign-in sheet) was also of real value.

Finally, Dr Goss commented on the Trust's balance sheet, noting that the capital of the Heritage Fund rose by some £300K on a fund of £4.3 million. In addition, the Trust aimed to hold a working reserve amounting to 1.5 – 2 times the annual expenditure. The Finance Committee had been very active during the year, disinvesting from one of the three main investment funds which had underperformed significantly. The committee's thinking was inevitably affected by the financial turbulence around the world, but it kept a good spread of diverse investments with a close eye on the performance of the long-term holdings. Administration costs remained stable, owing to the continued efforts of volunteers and a small number of consultants.

8. To receive the Trustees' Statutory Annual Report for the year ended 31 March 2026
The meeting received the annual report *nem con*.

9. To receive the audited Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2026
The meeting received the audited accounts *nem con*.

10. Election of President for the year to the end of the Annual Meeting 2027.

Having indicated that he was willing to serve for a further term, Bishop Gavin was elected with acclamation.

Best wishes were proffered for his forthcoming time as Acting Bishop of Oxford.

11. **A.O.B.**

Mr Scheele asked the Trustees to give thought to any repercussions for the Trust's scope arising out of the recently agreed local government reorganisation.

12. **Close of Meeting**

The Bishop closed the meeting with prayer.

Following the formal meeting, members of the Trust enjoyed a reception and guided tours of the house.