



Walpole Old Chapel - December 2021



The Year in Brief

We have decided, very reluctantly, not to go ahead with our candlelit service of carols and readings, which was scheduled for 18th December. With covid case rates still very high, and a limited ability to manage the risks, the committee felt it was safest to put it off for the second year running. We fully intend to hold this wonderful service before Christmas 2022!

This latest decision seems entirely symptomatic of a year that has seen many ups and downs. Covid restrictions meant we had to open at the end of June, rather than the traditional beginning of May. The precautions of social distancing, face coverings, hand sanitising and 'test and trace' were all still in place, and our service of remembering and thanksgiving had to be moved from July to October.

Fortunately, covid rates were low over the summer and early autumn. This enabled us to go ahead with the planned programme of weddings, the *Witchfinder* residency, early music concerts by Hexachordia and Loki Music, the musical play *The Unknown Bird*, 'Ride and Stride' and Heritage Open Days. We would like to thank the performers and the audiences and visitors who have supported the Chapel this year. It has been heartwarming to see the place alive again.

An innovation for us this year has been the 'local crafts and produce' sales area in the Chapel vestry, which has proved to be popular with visitors. We are very fortunate to have talented local 'makers' who are willing to sell their wares at the Chapel and give a generous percentage of their takings to the Chapel funds. Visitors have been able to buy pottery, stained glass, honey and lettering 'art cards'.

On a positive note, again, we have managed to sustain progress on the 'unwrapped' project for repair and re-rendering of the Chapel. Emerging from the fog, the shape of our application for Listed Buildings Consent has now become clear, if more complex than we'd originally envisaged. And the way in which the whole project might be funded, through a mix of our own fundraising efforts and grants from different funding bodies, is starting to take shape.

In the last couple of months, though, we have had to face several blows in quick succession. The first was the death of Vic Gray, long time friend of the Chapel and leader of our Discovery Project. We are very grateful to Miriam Stead for stepping forward to take on leadership of the project. Miriam is Secretary of the Suffolk Local History Council, and has huge experience in managing community history activities.

Secondly, after 12 years, Bill Mahood has stepped down from his role in chairing the Chapel committee. We are very grateful to him for his long stint at the helm, and we are pleased he will still be carrying out his ministerial role at weddings, baptisms, funerals and other Chapel services.



Walpole Old Chapel - December 2021



Finally, we have just learned that Viv Cooling is moving on from the Historic Chapels Trust to a new job with Sheffield Diocese. She has been very supportive to Walpole Old Chapel and will be greatly missed. We wish her well.

Further details on some of these topics are provided in the following articles

Tribute to Vic Gray MBE - Paul Simmons

The Chapel 'Discovery' project was not Vic's first project in and around Halesworth. He had led the 'Halesworth in the 1970s', 'Growing up in Halesworth' and 'Halesworth's Maltings Trail' projects as well as editing a book of Halesworth photographs from Fred Johnson. All this as well as chairing the Suffolk Records Society, a committee member of the Friends of Suffolk Record Office and Honorary Archivist of Helmingham Hall.

His professional background fitted him well for these 'retirement' activities. He had read English at Cambridge and then trained as an archivist at University College London and gained experience of archives in both Suffolk and Devon before getting a plum post as head of the Essex Record Office. But he left the security of the local government service for a post with Rothschilds developing its world renowned business archive- visiting all parts of the world where the Rothschild dynasty were based, providing a wealth of anecdotes to entertain his friends.

In addition to his formal work he played a large part in the professional activities of its other senior offices and consultancies. He was chairman in turn of the Association of County Archivists, the Society of Archivists, and the National Council on Archives. He held the presidency of the Society of Archivists from 2005 to 2008 and was also a board member of the Council for Museums, Libraries and Archives, acting as vice chairman of its Archives Task Force, which reported on the state and future of British archives in 2004. He served on the Historical Manuscripts Commission and on archive advisory committees for the Lord Chancellor, the Master of the Rolls and the Church of England.

He was awarded an Honorary Degree by the University of Essex in 1993 for his contribution to the study and publication of Essex history. In 2014 he was made a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the University of Suffolk. He was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and was awarded an M.B.E. in 2010 for services to British archives.

And he was above all a lovely man, who had warmth and humour in abundance.



Walpole Old Chapel - December 2021



Progress on the 'Unwrapped' Project - Simon Weeks

The project to repair and re-render the Chapel has taken a significant twist since architects from Historic England visited in September. First of all, they recommended that the Chapel should be placed on Historic England's heritage 'at risk' register. This has now happened, and is a welcome recognition of the serious problems caused by the failing render. It also means we may be able to apply for some funding from Historic England - funding that would not otherwise have been available to us.

Secondly, they have asked that we undertake additional works that were not part of the original scope. These include further investigative work to assess the state of the structural timbers before the old render is removed, and a thorough review of the surface water drainage system. These additional works will add an estimated £47,000 to the cost of the project, bringing the total to around £300,000.

Once Historic England have approved our proposals for how the additional works will be carried out, these can then be added into our application to East Suffolk Council for Listed Buildings Consent for the works.

We are hugely grateful for the way that individuals and organisations have supported the project by contributing to our fundraising appeal, during a year that we know has been financially difficult for many people. The total raised currently stands at just under £34,000. We see this as strong evidence of just how much the Chapel means to so many people and organisations. It is a powerful message to take to potential national funding bodies.

Walpole Old Chapel Discovery Project Sails On - Miriam Stead

I will begin by introducing myself. My name is Miriam Stead and following the very sad passing of Vic Gray in September, I have stepped in as the project co-ordinator with the intention that the research can continue apace. My background is in museums and I have been involved in several large scale and community heritage projects.

One of the first things I witnessed on joining the team was the signing of the partnership agreement with the Halesworth & District Museum. I am sure this will bring great benefit to both parties as the story of the Chapel and its congregation is integral to that of both communities as well as others in the District. We will be working together on a bid to the National Heritage Lottery Fund in the New Year which will help fund the research programme and the means to make it accessible to both the local community and a wider audience. Attaining and managing a smaller grant will create experience for the Chapel in anticipation of a larger application for the repair and conservation work.



Walpole Old Chapel - December 2021



I have also had the opportunity to meet the ten people who have so far volunteered to be part of the research project, albeit that we had to use the ubiquitous (but excellent) Zoom. We are mapping out what interests and skills we have in the team so we can cover as many aspects of the Chapel story as possible. We have also asked what training people might need and, apart from myself, the staff of the Suffolk Archives will be able to offer support as part of their lottery funded outreach programme.

Areas of research that we will be following include:

- The early years of the Chapel in the context of local religious belief and forms of worship
- Land ownership and property
- Family histories
- Governance – relationships with other organisations
- Oral history – capturing memories of those who have been associated with the Chapel over recent decades
- Examining the link between religious and social radicalism

If you are interested in helping with the research or perhaps in other ways such as publicity, making videos, vlogging or have some information or memories you would like to share, please do get in touch with me, Miriam Stead at discovery@walpoleoldchapel.org or 07902 411760

Witchfinder - Update

Regular readers will recall that this innovative musical project started life with development work in the Chapel in December last year. July saw four days of rehearsals in the Chapel with local choirs. Whilst we are hoping for live performances next year, we can now all see a short documentary about this fantastic work online through this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liKu04863Rg>



Walpole Old Chapel - December 2021



Conservation Management of the Chapel Yard – Simon Weeks



The Elm scrub has become rather a problem in the Chapel yard. It is starting to invade areas which should be open grassland. Attempts to clear it by hand using volunteer work parties have just served to show how widespread the scrub is and how resilient. The Chapel committee decided, in the summer, that the time had come for drastic action. We have now engaged a local contractor to brushcut the elm saplings and to paint each stem by hand with a systemic weedkiller. This should return the area to its former grassland habitat, but it may take two or three years of persistent effort.

Partnership with Halesworth and District Museum – Simon Weeks

In November the Chapel was extremely pleased to sign a partnership agreement with Halesworth and District Museum. Our vision of the way ahead involves working much more closely with other local organisations, in both the heritage and the arts sectors. This welcome first step will focus initially on the Discovery Project, providing joint oversight and support to the new project leader – Miriam Stead.

Chair of Museum trustees Pauline Wilcock said “The Museum is looking forward to working with Walpole Old Chapel on the Discovery Project and on future collaborative work”



Walpole Old Chapel - December 2021



The Year Ahead

Looking ahead, we anticipate another busy year in 2022.

The events programme will be taking shape over the next few months, but we already have two summer weddings booked, as well as concerts and group visits. We are planning to be open as usual for 'Ride and Stride' and Heritage Open Days on 10th & 11th September. Our experiment with a mid-week public open session for the summer holidays was not a great success this year. Instead, we might consider extending our opening times at the weekends, to give people more choice as to when they can visit.

If all goes well on the 'unwrapped' project, we expect to be submitting our application for Listed Buildings Consent in late spring/early summer. This will be preceded by a public exhibition at the Chapel of the proposed works. We hope people will want to drop in to look at the plans. Our architect - Kirstie Robbins - will be with us on the day, and will be able to answer any questions that people may have.

Running alongside our project to repair and conserve the building, the 'Discovery Project' should be in full swing next year. It will be very exciting to see what our community historians manage to unearth through their researches, and a lot of fun working out the best ways to bring those findings to the wider public. We hope to have enough material by the late summer/autumn to be able to put on a 'Discovery' open day at the Chapel, where our researchers share some of what they've found out, and members of the public can bring in their own stories, photographs or artifacts to share with us.

We will still be working hard, but in the background, on putting in place the various organisational developments we think we'll need in order to make a credible application for the main funding for the re-rendering. At the time of writing, we are about to apply to the Charity Commission to register as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation. This will make it easier to apply for some grants in our own name, and to claim gift aid on our own behalf, as well as providing protection for our trustees. We also expect to publish our first business plan next year. This will set out what we aim to achieve over the next few years and how we plan to do it. We hope this will demonstrate to potential funders that we have a financially sustainable future and that the Chapel is worth investing in.

Last, but not least, we are already looking forward to holding our traditional candlelit service of carols and readings before Christmas 2022!



Walpole Old Chapel - December 2021



What The Chapel Means to You - Simon Weeks

We have recently been looking back through people's comments in the visitors' book to see why the Chapel is such a special place to so many people. This analysis covers 658 comments left since September 2012. The comments fall into a number of identifiable groups or themes, as follows:

Positive, but unspecific comments [198, 30.1%]

"Unique. Amazing. Extraordinary. Special. Wonderful. Treasure. Gem" etc

The atmosphere [86, 13.1%]

"Moving. Evocative. Peaceful. Spiritual. Calm. Serene, Tranquil. Uplifting. Inspiring." Etc

The building itself [73, 11.1%]

"Simplicity. Rustic. Setting. Homespun" etc

The stewards [70, 10.6%]

"Welcoming. Knowledgeable. Opening for us. Keeping it open. Showing us round. Looking after the chapel" etc

History [49, 7.4%]

"Historic. Sense of History"

Interest [46, 7.0%]

"Interesting. Fascinating. Captivating." Etc

Events [46, 7.0%]

Concerts. Exhibitions. Lectures. Group visits. Summer/Harvest teas. Open Days.

Condition of building [40, 6.1%]

"Well maintained. Well preserved."

Religious significance (27, 4.1%)

Services. Non-conformism.

Family/local connections [23, 3.5%]

Contact information

Simon Weeks, Secretary: 01986 784348 or info@walpoleoldchapel.org

To become a Friend of the Chapel: friends@walpoleoldchapel.org

To donate on line: <http://easydonate.org/HCTE2>

To contact the Discovery Project team: discovery@walpoleoldchapel.org