



Walpole Old Chapel - June 2025



Unwrapping the Chapel is underway...



... it is really happening!

On 14 April, Cliveden Conservation began to remove the failed cement render on the west and north-facing walls of the Chapel. The full team of experts working on the project plus the Conservation Officer from East Suffolk Council visited the site on Friday 16th May. Everyone, including Simon and Jacquie for FWOC, was fascinated to see the historical materials and construction processes that had been hidden under the rendered skin of the Chapel. It felt as if the ghosts of the early builders were hovering around us, curious to know how well their work had lasted. We were impressed.



Cliveden started with the west elevation - the side that overlooks the fields behind the Chapel. Over the last five weeks, painstaking work has removed the render without damaging the underlying late seventeenth-century timber framework which forms a matrix for the infill panels made with what is known in Suffolk as 'cob and pole'. 'Cob' (i.e. daub) was a sloppy mixture of clay, sand and animal hair which dried to form a hard, weather-proof surface. Many of the copiced hazel poles have crumbled to dust, leaving corrugated grooves in the cob.



An interesting discussion started about how to balance the need to preserve the original structure with the need to conserve the building for the future. In some places, none of the original building material has survived, leaving empty holes in the wall. This photo, taken at ground floor level, shows the structural engineer pointing to one example. On the window sill is a sample wood fibre block that has been approved for use as infill when no other option is possible. At the same time, Cliveden Conservation are experimenting to create C21st 'cob', using a clay-based mixture bonded with goats hair which will fix securely to the new wooden laths. More news next time.



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Bill Mahood retires as our Minister



Bill Mahood, a retired minister of the United Reformed Church, former Moderator of General Assembly and teacher at Westminster College, Cambridge visited Walpole Old Chapel in 2007 and, after talking with David Holmes and Christina Van Melzen, knew that he wanted to be involved in the future of the Chapel.

Within a short time, he became a member of the Committee and a few months later the Minister, officiating at weddings, funerals, baptisms and the annual candle lit carol service. His final duties were over the weekend of March 15th & 16th 2025 for a Baptism on the Saturday and a wedding on the Sunday. Bill reflected on his involvement with Walpole Old Chapel. "What has been most important to me has been exploring the history of the Chapel and sharing it with people. I have loved meeting people who visited the Chapel on Saturday afternoons in the summer and being there to welcome people at concerts and weddings and to tell them something of its amazing history. Walpole is a place of lively interest and activity, and I believe it will continue in this pattern".

We are so grateful to Bill for his years of devoted service as our Minister. We will miss his thought provoking talks, his creation of a festive and reflective carol service and his love for John Donne's poetry. At the same time, we are thrilled that Revd. Dr Catherine Ball will be joining us. An experienced pastoral minister in the United Reformed Church, Catherine has been a medical social worker in Canada, the Free Church Chaplain at Hinchingsbrooke Hospital and is an Associate Tutor at Westminster College, Cambridge. We look forward to welcoming her to Walpole Old Chapel.



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Words & Music Saturday 12th July 7.30-8.30 at The Cut, Halesworth



An evening of songs and readings featuring some of our finest musicians and local writers celebrating and spanning the life of Chapel, from its seventeenth century origins to the present.



Charmain Bedford has appeared in operas at Opera North, Garsington and Aldeburgh and concerts at the Wigmore Hall and The Barbican. She will be joined by Madeleine Holmes - a singing storyteller in a broad range of repertoire on stage and in song, including opera at the Queen Elizabeth Hall and Sadlers Wells, recitals at the Wigmore Hall and jazz from The American Songbook at The Ritz.



Rob Gildon's baritone voice is often heard at Walpole Old Chapel in concerts and the annual candlelit carol service. A selection of his many operatic roles includes appearances at The Queen Elizabeth Hall, ROH, Garsington and recitals of Bach's St Matthew's Passion and Hayden's Creation.



Nathan Williamson has written operas and compositions for the concert hall. His recording of "100 years of British song" with tenor James Gilchrist, was awarded Recording of the Month by Limelight. A talented pianist, he has played the complete Beethoven Concertos and is a member of Piano Circus, an innovative piano ensemble of 6 pianos.



They will be joined by John Myerscough, the cellist with the Doric String Quartet which performs in London, Europe, USA, Japan and Australia. An accomplished soloist, John is Professor of cello and chamber music at the Royal Academy of Music and gives string quartet masterclasses at Chamber Studio in London.



The evening will also comprise readings by three Suffolk writers all of whom have strong links with The Chapel. Novelist and biographer Lucy Hughes-Hallett's latest book "The Scapegoat: The Brilliant Brief Life of the Duke of Buckingham", has been shortlisted for the Duff Cooper Prize and the Plutarch Award.



Julia Blackburn says of her many books, plays and stories, "Everything I have written has been part of my life in one way or another... I am fascinated by the way that one can get closer to an understanding of a long-dead stranger or a distant time." We look forward to listening to this multi award-winning author.



Writer, novelist and cultural critic, Olivia Laing's most recent book, "The Garden Against Time: In Search of a Common Paradise", was a Sunday Times number one bestseller and shortlisted for the Wainwright Prize and the Kirkus Prize.

Tickets at £20 are available from The Cut - <https://thecut.org.uk>



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How the Chapel was rescued in 1994

January 2026 will be a major step forward as ownership of the Chapel will probably pass from the Historic Chapels Trust (HCT) to FWOC. But readers may be curious to know how the Old Chapel located in deepest north-east Suffolk came into the ownership of a national, London-based charity in the first place. Staff at the Suffolk Archives generously gave their time to train some of the Discovery Project volunteers in oral history techniques and, in 2022, Judith Condon recorded interviews with seven people who were connected to the Chapel in some way. Her interviews with Mrs Christina van Melzen who became Secretary and a leading figure in the first local Walpole Chapel committee and Revd Bill Mahood who joined the committee in 2007 tell the story of how the Chapel was saved in 1994.

Walpole Old Chapel was listed as a Grade II* heritage building in December 1966 when a small congregation still gathered for regular worship. But unable to sustain themselves and their much-loved building, in 1970 ownership passed to the Suffolk Congregational Union. In the early 1990s, the SCU finally decided that Walpole should be considered redundant and sold off. What happened next most probably came as a surprise to many. The Chapel had acquired an extremely influential neighbour who was passionate about the Chapel and deeply interested in the history of nonconformism in Suffolk. David Holmes and his wife Linda had moved into the house which shares a garden fence with the south end of the chapel yard during the 1980s.



DAVID HOLMES was formerly a BBC political journalist and broadcaster. Political Editor in the 1970s; Chief Assistant to Director-General Ian Trethowan in the early 1980s; then Secretary of the Corporation. In 1972 he launched the radio arts programme *Kaleidoscope*. Restored to his native Suffolk, he organised thirteen years of classical chamber concerts, at Walpole Old Chapel, Halesworth United Reformed Church and finally Cratfield Church.

In 1994, a *For Sale* sign board was erected in the chapel yard but, as Bill says "David, being David, was having none of that!" Within a week, Christina remembers, he had persuaded the Suffolk Congregational Union to take the Chapel off the market to allow time for alternatives to be explored. David contacted Christopher Stell who knew Walpole well and had selected a photograph of the Chapel's interior as the frontispiece for his *Inventory of Chapels and Meeting Houses in Eastern England*. Rapidly accelerating losses of nonconformist chapels and meeting houses during the 1980s were threatening the destruction of this most important aspect of religious and cultural life across the country. In 1993, the Historic Chapels Trust was registered as a national charity committed to taking into its ownership a small number of exceptional chapels. David lobbied the trustees of HCT and was, fortunately, pushing at an open door. In late 1994, Walpole Old Chapel became the second Chapel acquired by HCT.



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Without an endowment to help look after the building, the local group of supporters became a formal committee with Christina acting as secretary and building a network of financial supporters. Bill joined the committee in 2007, becoming Minister and chairman of the committee in 2009-2010. David and Linda Holmes dedicated themselves to promoting hugely successful summer programmes of concerts to raise money for the Chapel.

David asked Bill Mahood to take on responsibility for the historic documents concerning the Chapel that he had been storing at home. These included the original Indenture signed in 1689 which still had all the seals attached to it. Bill was embarrassed to admit the documents were stored "under my bed" for a year before he took advice from the emeritus professor of modern church history at Cambridge about what to do with them. They have great monetary as well as historical value, the professor told him and would be snapped up at auction. Within a week the original documents were handed over to the Suffolk Archives and a framed copy of the Indenture still hangs in the Chapel.

Discovery Team Visit to Great Yarmouth

On 15th May the Discovery Team, led by volunteer Judith Condon, enjoyed a guided visit to Great Yarmouth. We were joined by Friends and volunteers of the Chapel, plus guests from Halesworth Museum and the U3A Local History Group, filling a minibus hired from HACT and driven by John who volunteers for HACT. We began our visit at the massive and impressive Minster Church of St Nicholas, where local historian Paul Davies gave us a fascinating tour of this Norman foundation that was sadly firebombed during WWII. What exists now is c1960, although in ancient style.





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Of interest to Walpole historians, is the fact that the original church was physically divided into three between 1649-1660 and was home to three congregations. The Church of England occupied the nave, the Presbyterians the north aisle and the Chancel was home to the Independents led by William Bridge. From here he gave his blessing to the establishment of a congregation at Cookley and Walpole.



After visiting the church we walked through the town centre, stopping to admire the Fishermen's Hospital, fine almshouses for 'decayed fishermen' and their wives, and the large, mostly open marketplace. We wandered through one of the few remaining narrow rows of shops and cottages that once characterised this ancient fishing port. Down by the still busy harbour we looked at the 19th century thatched icehouse, the only survival of its type in the country. Ice was brought from Norway during the winter and stored here for use in preserving and transporting fish to market. The icehouse is being converted into a national centre for outdoor arts and circus. After admiring the banqueting hall in Great Yarmouth's impressive Town Hall, we explored the quieter area of the town looking at the scattered historic buildings that had survived the war, ending up at the fascinating Time & Tide Museum for lunch.

Members of the group were then free to explore before meeting up at our bus for what we expected would be a trouble-free journey back to Halesworth. However, the minibus started making a horrible, grinding gear-box noise just as we had reached Hopton. Thank goodness we broke down close to a pub rather than a field! John phoned for assistance while we chatted over drinks. In less than an hour help reached us as John's colleague Colin arrived with a second



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HACT bus to get us home - only an hour behind schedule! We really appreciated the efforts of both voluntary drivers to rescue us. During our excellent day out, people in complementary organisations made new friends and we hope these will lead to future collaborations.

Advance notice: the AGM takes place on 5th July 2025

The Friends of Walpole Old Chapel was registered with the Charity Commission as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) in 2022. Our third AGM as a CIO will take place on **Saturday, 5th July** starting at **4.30 pm**. The conservation work means the building is currently in no fit state for us to hold the AGM at the Chapel. Please make a note that the AGM will be held at the **Pavillion in Walpole village**. Simon Weeks will be circulating the papers in advance. Refreshments, including home-made cake, will be provided at 4.00pm as an extra inducement for people to come along!

Tuscany rose cuttings from the chapel yard - Anne Thomas

Some of you will have noticed the rose which grows with great energy from the 'coffin' graves which are placed opposite the main door of the Chapel.



The graves are those of Sarah and John Goodwin, and their two children - named after their parents. The children died quite young - Sarah died on January 1st 1842 at the age of 22, and her brother John died on February 26th, 1849, aged 25.

The rose, which is a rather beautiful deep purple/red rambler has been identified as an old variety - Rosa Tuscany - a rambler of a type which may not have been introduced into Europe until the late 17th or early 18th c although it is known that some may have been brought back earlier by returning Crusaders, and David Austin Roses cites *Tuscany* as having been introduced c1600. W. Paul - a rose grower - introduced the rose 'Tuscany' for sale in 1848.

The rose proves quite easy to grow from cuttings, and I am proposing to grow a small amount for sale at a reasonable price to raise funds for the Chapel.







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Walpole in the News

The spring edition of the SPS magazine *Suffolk View* has published an article on the history of the Chapel and the plans for the *Unwrapped* project. Our press release led to a story on the BBC News Suffolk website: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cvg8w5y7vg2o>. Finally, the HCT included an appeal to its supporters in its spring newsletter to contribute towards the *Walpole Unwrapped* project. FWOC has contributed to the total cost and wants to thank, once again, all the local supporters who have helped us play our part.

Thanks to the funders of *Walpole Unwrapped*

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