FRIENDS OF ROMSEY ABBEY
Charity No: 1134191
CHRISTMAS 2025 NEWSLETTER



Welcome to our Christmas newsletter which we hope will give you an idea of our activities since the summer with some insights into how we support the Abbey as well as enjoying ourselves.

We wish all our members a peaceful and enjoyable Christmas with all good wishes for 2026. For some, this time of year is not a time of joyous celebration, so do please spare a thought for those who don't perhaps feel there is cause for celebration be they local, national or international.

What we've been adding ....

Our clear aims focus on enhancing the visitor experience as well as supporting the Abbey in whatever way we can. A couple of projects which have come to fruition are here with others in the pipeline. Whilst progress has been slow on a some of the projects due to outside influences, the Abbey now has a ceiling mirror which enables all to look at the ceilings without the risk of falls whilst trying to look up and walk. The crossing ceiling is of particular interest because of its design. The final product is compact and easily moved so that it does not in itself create a hazard to those walking around the Abbey.



The flower arrangements – around a dozen of them – help to give a warmth of welcome to the Abbey and are created due to the dedication of the flower arranging team. Issues arose over the abandonment of oasis for helping create the displays (it proved to be non-friendly ecologically) and the system of using chicken wire did not prove an adequate replacement. A design for wire structures was created making it easier not only to create the arrangements, but also to make them the quality the team was seeking. Thus, the Friends are covering the cost of these inserts – each pedestal is of a differing size, so it wasn't possible to create a 'one size fits all'. In addition, the Friends are donating £1,000 a year towards the cost of flowers and we hope all enjoy the outcomes.



What have we spent over the course of the last year? – we will have spent just over £10,000 covering the cost of the Ceiling Viewer Mirror, 1/3 of the cost of the Abbey Vine new sound system, a re-print of the Abbey Visitor Leaflets, UV film for the Cope cabinet as well as the first annual contribution towards the cost of the Abbey flowers together with the wire inserts. In addition, there has been the cost of the Canis QR code as well as the annual donation of £3,000 for the Youth Worker. We will also be covering the costs for Light in the Abbey, the cost of which is not known at the time of going to press.

Another delve into the archives – The Hon & Revd Gerard Thomas Noel - Saviour of the Abbey

Gerard Noel became Vicar of Romsey in December 1840 at the age of 58 and clearly fell in love with the place. With all the energy we associate with the Victorians, he set about tackling 300 years of under investment in both the church and parish...and he did it largely with his own money. In the ten years before he died, in harness, in February 1851 it is estimated that he spent on improvements the equivalent of half a million pounds in 2025-equivalent money.

Despite working on his improvements, he did not neglect his pastoral duties; in fact, he was known as *The Good Vicar*. On his death Noel opted to be buried in Romsey, rather than with



his forebears in the church of his ancestral home at Exton, Rutland. By public subscription, the parish raised the money to buy a stained-glass window in his honour, showing how well-loved he was.



South Nave arcade arch repaired with artificial stone

Noel's first and best-known project was to remove the 200 years of limewashing from the internal walls and columns of the church. It had grown to be 3 to 5 inches thick and totally obscured the fine stonework and architectural detail of the building. Work started at the western end where scaffolding was erected to enable the workmen to access the upper reaches. As cleaning progressed the scaffolding was moved incrementally eastwards so that the next region could be tackled. When the limewash was removed it revealed areas of damage to the masonry that had been poorly repaired, e g with "loose bricks and rubbish". Small areas were repaired with new stone, but apparently "several pillars had to be rebuilt from the base". In a few places repairs were made using artificial stone (concrete); the most obvious being the arches of bays 2 and 3 of the south Nave arcade. The work was completed in only 18 months between 1843 and 1845, without injury to any of the 20 to 30 workmen involved.



Nave gallery, Coster organ and massive curtain before 1840

The gallery filling the three easternmost bays of the Nave was removed together with the Coster organ that was mounted on top of it and the full-width, full-height draught-proofing curtain which hung behind it. This opened up the fine vista looking west through the Nave. New pews were erected in the Nave to accommodate parishioners displaced from the gallery and a committee was set up to consider how to replace the Coster organ. Their work finally came to fruition in November1858 when the current Walker organ was installed.

Behind the massive curtain, the Nave was quite bare. A rather dilapidated 15th century font occupied a central position about level with the North Door. In May 1843 Noel donated a new font which he placed at the Crossing, presumably to make Baptism central to public worship (and a warmer experience for the baptismal party). Apart from the font, there were some tombs and the north-western corner had been made into a school with its own door to the outside and rooms on two levels. Noel demolished the school and planned for a new, larger, purpose-designed school. A site was acquired in what is now Church Lane and the Church Architect, Benjamin Ferry, was commissioned to design it. Meanwhile, the school was accommodated in a temporary building in the Churchyard. The doorway in the wall of the last bay of the North Nave Aisle was closed up in 1847 using stone cut from the15th century font. The new school – for Infants and Girls - opened in 1851, just months after Noel's death. The building is still in use today as the administrative block for the Abbey Junior school.

The Nave Aisles of the original Norman church have stone vaulted ceilings back-filled with rubble to provide a floor at triforium level. By contrast, the Aisles of the western extension were originally open to the roof. Noel had ceilings constructed for them from lath and plaster fashioned to resemble the stone vaulting of the earlier work.

In 1847 the floor of the Bell Ringing Chamber was raised by 12 feet to enable some fine Norman arcading to be seen from the body of the church.

The ambulatory around the Chancel had become cluttered with table tombs. Noel removed these and repaired the floor with York stone. Removal of a particularly imposing tomb revealed the wall painting in St Mary's chapel, which had escaped being limewashed.

The Abbesses Doorway, which had been completely bricked-up, was partially opened up by placing a window in the upper part.



The Abbesses Doorway partially opened up as a window

Romsey was without a Vicarage, so each new Vicar had to find his own accommodation, which need not be in Romsey. Noel set the ball rolling to correct this omission. He acquired a site for the Vicarage at the junction of Church Street and what is now Church Place and commissioned Benjamin Ferry to design the building. However, Noel died before the Vicarage could be built and the site was lost to the parish. Ferry's Vicarage was eventually built on a new site adjacent to the new school in 1856. Legal problems associated with building on this site would fill another article and are still with us today.

Next time we will consider the man himself, his life before Romsey, the continued association of his wife and daughters with Romsey and the strange case of disappearing windows.

THE SOCIAL SCENE

COFFEE MORNINGS held bi-monthly in the Town Hall are always well attended and provide an opportunity for comfortable and companionable social interaction together with cafetiere coffee, home-made biscuits and a raffle with a range of prizes. The cost for this event is just £2 which has been held for some considerable time and is great value. In addition, we welcome non-members as well as members, so if you know someone who would like an opportunity to find out about the Friends, this is a first class one. All are welcome.

DESERT ISLAND DISCS Another 'victim' – sorry, 'castaway', Revd. Sally Womersley, was captured for an evening in the Church Rooms to share with 70 Friends and guests hearing tales of her life which covered a vast range of experiences and employment. Her taste in music was eclectic ranging from classic to the Beatles, David Bowie, and culminating in her final choice of Abba's Dancing Queen. A fascinating insight into a well-known member of the Abbey clergy.





CRUISING DOWN THE RIVER – The annual boat trip took place this year from Donnington Bridge. Despite the best laid plans, the original boat booked could not be used as one of the locks had broken overnight so the boat couldn't get to collect the passengers. However, the group enjoyed an afternoon cruising along in the 'Wargrave' built in 1913 taking in Folly Bridge, the Head of the River and down towards Sandford Lock.



FOUR CHURCHES TOUR – 17 members of the Friends enjoyed a visit to four local churches, this time covering Wherwell, Longparish, St Mary Bourne and Hurstbourne Priors. All four churches had specific items of interest and the day was fully enjoyed by all who found Brian Woodruffe's guidance highly interesting and enlightening. A lovely lunch was enjoyed at The George in St Mary Bourne.





PETWORTH HOUSE AND PARK - A beautiful autumn day saw fifteen Members exploring the House and Park. The House is home to an extraordinary range of art and the magnificent 17th century mansion itself stands as a monument to the evolving taste of the Percy family over almost 900 years. Amongst the delights was the mediaeval church which is now housed within the mansion as well as the beautiful Capability Brown parkland.

TALK WITH PUDDINGS – A brilliant evening was spent when Judith Beton, a member of the Abbey Vine congregation gave a fascinating talk on the role of Romsey Abbey as one of just six Royal Nunneries, which played a critical part in the religious and political development of the late Saxon period right up to the Norman Conquest. Such was the enthusiasm for this event that it was a sell-out and will be repeated in 2026. If you missed it first time round, there will be another opportunity. Delicious puddings were supplied by Adrienne Mordan and friends and were rapidly consumed.





'MY FAIR LADY' AT THE MILL AT SONNING - Since 2017 the Friends have been going to The Mill at Sonning for the theatre's offering of a classic musical. In all these years there has not been a poor experience but by common consent this year's performance of 'My Fair Lady' was outstanding! Whether singing, dancing or speaking, the energetic and talented cast gave a superb show. This came after a delicious lunch in the Mill's comfortable restaurant. The 53 Friends on the trip had a thoroughly enjoyable day.

BOTTLE TOMBOLA AT THE ABBEY CHRISTMAS FAIR – what a bumper year – 317 bottles generously donated by Friends and members of the congregation. There was rarely a time when there wasn't a queue at the stall resulting in over £900 being raised for the Abbey funds, the total for the whole Fair being over £9,000. The Mayor of Romsey, Cllr Russell Theron opened the Fair and also visited the Bottle Tombola whilst there. What will next year bring?



What of 2026? The Events Programme will be published early in the year giving all the opportunity of signing up for those trips and events throughout the year which appeal to the individual. They will certainly include the Thames Boat Trip as well as a theatre trip to the Mill at Sonning. The Talk with Puddings on the Royal Nunneries is booked with much more in the pipeline and the programme will be shared with all Members as well as appearing on the website – www.romseyabbeyfriends.org . Why not join us at our first Coffee Morning of the year on Friday 16 January, 10.00 – 11.30 am in the Town Hall. £2.00 for coffee and home-made biscuits, raffle and great company. Open to all.

What do we ask? Just your continuing support and encouragement to those you know to join our ranks in our efforts to support this beautiful and historical building. It is always helpful to have others on our committee who have skills which can help extend our outreach and efforts. If you are interested in helping, do email office@romseyabbeyfriends.org .

