THE FRIENDS OF ROMSEY ABBEY
Charity No: 1134191
SUMMER 2026 NEWSLETTER



Welcome to our Summer Newsletter So, here we are again. Allegedly summer although that seems to come and go – when it comes, it comes with full heat but where would we be as a nation if we didn't have the weather to talk about!

It's been a busy year for the Friends with an eclectic mix of events and trips throughout the year and with more to come during the rest of this year as well as plans already afoot for next year's programme. Whilst it may be a while before the finalised programme is shared, do please join in some of the events – they are a wonderful opportunity to get to know others and spend time in some amazing and interesting places.

As ever, whilst Coffee Mornings remain popular as well as being open to non-members, we would love to see our membership grow with new views and ideas coming to the fore. If any members know of a friend who they think might consider becoming a Friend, do please encourage them to have a taste of the friendship and camaraderie which is present at the Coffee Mornings – such great value for coffee, home-made biscuits, raffle and great company. Equally well, if any members have ideas they feel may be of interest to us, don't be shy and contact a member of the Committee to put them forward – we are always open to new ideas on any aspect of our work and support of our lovely Abbey.

£ Money – how have we spent it? £

In the course of the last six months we have spent just over £12,000 supporting a range of projects including the replacement contactless stations, a series of hand-outs, the QR code for the Audioguide, as well as a camera for the peregrines. In addition, we have been delighted with the updated and upgraded displays for Sir William Petty and … that amazingly impressive display for the Abbey Timeline. The final payment has been made for the new Abbey signage and we will be pleased to see that in place in the very near future.

What are we planning to support in the future?
It is readily agreed that many of the projects supported by the Friends have been relatively small and, whilst these have made practical improvements, plans are afoot to look at much bigger projects to utilise the funds we are currently holding. To this end, a working party has been created to look at such projects including the Threadgold treasury as well as other relics in the Abbey including renovation of the Flemish chest (comparable to one held in the V&A).

THE SOCIAL SCENE

We have been out and about enjoying ourselves and, perhaps learning a bit here and there. There is a wide range of opportunities to pay visits to places of interest as well as occasional evening events such as when another 'victim' has agreed to be a part of a Desert Island Discs presentation!

COFFEE MORNINGS – these will continue to take place bi-monthly in the Town Hall being open to non-members as well as members. Fantastic value and a warm welcome is assured.

TALK WITH PUDDINGS Early in the year Judith Beton once again made her presentation on 'The Royal Nunneries: Romsey Abbey in its Anglo-Saxon Setting'. Those who missed the last presentation, were fortunate in having another opportunity to enjoy it as well as the delicious puddings

Full steam ahead at STEAM Swindon and Lydiard Park Museum and Gardens



Our first outing was to STEAM - the Museum of the Great Western Railway - sited on the old railway works responsible for the growth of Swindon. After a short welcome by Museum staff, we were free to experience the magnificent exhibitions. We gained an insight into the large number of jobs and processes involved at the works where health and safety was very different. However, the workforce seemed well looked after and enjoyed their jobs. Many of the exhibits of locomotives, coaches, the signal box, were the originals and used authentic materials. This gave a sense of scale to the works before the 1950s.

In the afternoon, we visited Lydiard Park Museum and Gardens, where we enjoyed lunch. The House, which dates from 1743, was opened specially for our visit. The extensive Parkland looked beautiful in the sunshine, featuring two lakes and a fountain as well as a walled garden. A smaller lake had been an essential source of food, mainly fish, and in historic times Queen Elizabeth1 dined on fish from it.

HISTORY IN PORTCHESTER AND AT FORT NELSON

On a day of uncertain weather, our group set off initially, to Portchester Castle. Whilst the castle was originally a Saxon fortification, the Norman keep was added in the 12th century. It housed several thousand prisoners of war from the Napoleonic wars some of whom carved graffiti still visible. The castle displays were very well presented and, of course, the views from the 100ft high keep, looked across the span of the Solent.

St Mary's church in the corner of the castle, is of Norman origin - an active part of the community. The graveyard is immaculate and includes a number of gravestones from the Commonwealth Wargraves Commission.



The next stop was a climb (in a minibus!) up Portsdown Hill to Fort Nelson which is part of the Royal Armouries. The Fort, as well as others in the area, was built in the 1860s to protect the city and area of Portsmouth from the French. It was used in the First World War as a holding fort for soldiers and later as an ammunition store for anti-aircraft funds along the south coast during the Second World War. The number of cannons on display is incredible and again, depictions of the life of the Fort, how it was built (by navvies) and the reasons for it were clearly displayed. Suffice to say that towards the end of the afternoon, one of our number dropped into a chair claiming to be 'cannoned out'.



AGM and AFTERNOON TEA

The AGM of the Friends of Romsey Abbey took place in the Church Rooms with around 60 members present. The presentations informed that in the course of 2025, the FRA had donated over £10,000 in small projects which have helped to enhance the ambience and visitor experience to the Abbey. Whilst these have been small projects, the plan for the next year is, with the blessing and agreement of the PCC, to support much larger projects thus utilising some of the funds accrued.

Once the formalities had been completed and the trustees and officers voted in, a delicious afternoon tea was shared by all. Thanks to Liz Wagner a delightful range of cakes and goodies were served along with an endless supply of tea and coffee courtesy of the catering team. Tea was followed by a choral evensong in dedicated to the FRA, where the quality of music, supported by Schola Cantorum, was outstanding – a fitting and beautiful end to the day.

BROCKENHURST CHURCHES



On an extremely hot day in July two minibuses with The Friends of Romsey Abbey went to the historic and delightful St Nicholas' Church, in Brockenhurst. The church is one of the oldest churches in the New Forest and one of only two churches in the area mentioned in the Doomsday Book of 1086. Christian worship is thought to have taken place on the site since at least the 8th century, making it a place of more than 1,200 years of history. It sits in a peaceful setting on Church Lane just outside the centre of Brockenhurst. Parts of the building date from Saxon and Norman times with later mediaeval and Victorian additions.

The beautifully maintained churchyard contains over 100 Commonwealth War Graves, most of them New Zealand soldiers who died after being treated at the nearby NO1 New Zealand hospital during the First World War.. The church features many stunning stained glass windows, including a commemorative window, which tells the story of Brockenhurst's important wartime role. A place well worth a visit.

After the opportunity to explore the architecture of the Church and the grounds, including seeing a magnificent 1000-year-old Great Yew Tree, the group drove to the other Brockenhurst Church of St Saviour's. This was equally impressive, although younger, having started construction in 1895 and finally completed in 1961. The building is Gade II listed and recognized for its architectural and historic importance. We were hospitably welcomed by the Mothers' Union, who provided a delicious cream tea enjoyed by all. Well worth a visit to both churches, St Nicholas' for its Saxon and Norman history and St Saviour's for its impressive Victorian Gothic architecture.

What else?

What has been missed? Actually, very little, although it has to be said (yes, it does!) that we are always happy to welcome new members - it really can't be possible to have too many members and the more members, then the more support we can plan to give to our lovely Abbey. In addition, the bulk of the work is carried out by those who sit on the Committee and are Trustees of the Charity. If any member of the Friends would like to join this group, they will be warmly welcomed. That small group does sterling work and, as they say, many hands make light work – maybe!

The website – efforts are being made to make the website more interesting and carry snippets of news and information that aren't necessarily more visibly shared. The plan for this forthcoming year is to give more information on the website on the various venues in the social programme so do be sure to check it out – you may see something in the detail of the social programme that draws your attention. Meanwhile – we thank you all for your support. Without it we couldn't carry out so many projects to support our beautiful Abbey.

AND – for those interested in the historical background, here is more from

Delving back into the archives – The Hon & Rev Gerard Thomas Noel – The Good Vicar – Part 2

In December 1840 Canon Gerard Noel took up his appointment as Vicar of Romsey. It was an eventful time for him. Just two years before, both his wife and his father had died; and within the next twelve months he would marry his second wife, Susan, and become an Honourable, when his elder brother, Charles, was created Earl of Gainsborough. There was no vicarage at Romsey so he had had to find a house of sufficient size to accommodate himself, his future wife, his unmarried, grown-up daughters and servants. It is understood that he chose Abbey House, now part of the La Sagesse complex.

Immediately before coming to Romsey, Gerard had spent seven years as a Prebendary Canon on the staff of Winchester Cathedral, so he had the opportunity to get to know the diocese and its parishes quite well. I wonder if he, like the Ven Geoffrey Finch in more recent times, developed a strong desire to become a parish priest once more and in Romsey too?

In a previous article I described the incredible amount of work he undertook to improve the interior of the Abbey and its facilities. This must have caused significant disruption to services and there was no organ to lead hymn singing, yet the congregation appears to have been totally supportive of the work. We can probably put this down to Noel's personality

and communication skills. Indeed, after the initial improvements were complete the congregation wanted to subscribe to a present for him to show their thanks. Hearing of this, he urged them not to spend their money on him but to use it to support future improvement projects.

Gerard was a conservative evangelical whose theology was Calvinistic. He was well-connected in the clerical world, not only through his influential family but also through his close friendships with William Wilberforce and his son, Samuel. Samuel became Bishop of Oxford and is probably best-known for leading the debate against Darwin's idea of the Origin of Species through Natural Selection. Gerard's younger brother, Wriothesley, was one of the most influential evangelical clergymen of early Victorian England. Gerard himself was an intellectual; publishing, *inter alia,* an influential treatise on the future of the church, two books of sermons and many hymns.

He was born Gerard Thomas Edwardes in 1782. In 1798 his father changed the family name to Noel, with whom they were closely related (presumably to comply with the conditions pertaining to receipt of a legacy?). A scholar, Gerard went to Edinburgh University the same year, aged only 16, apparently intending a career in law. But in 1801, aged 18, he entered Trinity College, Cambridge to prepare for the church.



Western end of South Garth with the Noel grave monument

As mentioned before, when he died, he chose to be buried in Romsey, in the South Garth, rather than with his ancestors in Rutland. He even asked for his first wife's body to be disinterred from the Cathedral and buried with him. The parishioners finally had an opportunity to show their appreciation; they subscribed to a stained-glass window installed in bay 2 of the South Nave Aisle depicting St John the Evangelist in his old age, seated and exhorting those around him to love one another.

His second wife, Susan, and some of his daughters continued to live and worship in Romsey after his death. They gave the Abbey some of its first stained-glass windows; one in memory of Gerard at the western end of the South Nave Aisle depicting the good shepherd after the popular print by Steinle, "a fitting subject for one who was such a faithful and loving pastor". Another, given by his daughters in memory of their mother, Charlotte Sophia, depicting Jesus blessing little children, was at the western end of the North Nave Aisle.



The Good Shepherd by Steinle

In 1855 Susan funded the conversion of the South Chancel Aisle into a chapel suitable for weekday services with smaller congregations. She and Caroline, in 1860, donated a stained-glass window to go at the head of this chapel, above the altar in St Anne's, in memory of Elizabeth Painter, who had been a faithful servant to the Noels for 55 years. It depicted the Epiphany because her birthday fell on that festival. This window, the other two Noel windows and the parishioners' window all came from the London workshop of Michael O'Connor and Sons.

In 1910 it seems that both the location and subject matter of Mrs Painter's window were taken over by the Ashley family to commemorate Antony Evelyn Melbourne Ashley with a window by Kempe. The original window was lost but a replacement by Kempe was commissioned by Lady Ashley and placed in the second bay of the South Chancel Aisle; the subject matter is the boy Jesus in the Temple talking with the Doctors of the Law. Also in 1910, a new window was offered by the Bishop of St Albans, Edgar Jacob, in memory of his mother, Anna Sophia, eldest daughter of Gerard Noel. However, I have found no evidence that this proposed gift was accepted by the Abbey and implemented.

Noel's third daughter, Charlotte, died in Romsey in December 1848, having been married for 16 years to the Rev James Drummond Munro, Rector of Sternfield, Suffolk and bore him 11 children. She was commemorated by a stained-glass window in the first bay of the South Chancel Aisle, probably another O'Connor window, subject: Jesus at Bethany with Mary and Martha.

Sadly, the two stained-glass windows to Gerard Noel, the one to his first wife, and those to his daughters Anna (if it existed) and Charlotte, have all been removed. More sadly, there is no known, high-quality photograph of any of these windows, not even in the Stanley Sales archive. Also, I have been unable to find any account, official or otherwise, of why they were removed; yet such action must surely have required approval by the PCC and diocese. The Hon & Rev Gerard Thomas Noel was the Abbey's greatest benefactor and a much-loved vicar. Yet, subsequent generations have treated his memory and that of his family with less respect than they deserve.
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