



## FRIENDS OF REPTON PARISH CHURCH

Charity No. 1162837

### NEWSLETTER NO 5 JUNE 2023



<https://www.friendsofreptonparishchurch.co.uk>  
email: [frpc.873ad@gmail.com](mailto:frpc.873ad@gmail.com)

## Welcome to the June 2023 Newsletter

In this issue you will find

- a report of progress since the charity was set up
- a report of possibly the last dig in the Vicarage garden
- a continuation of the story of the crypt based on information taken from the Church Archives
- dates for your diary.

We hope you find something of interest to you.

## Update of progress since FRPC was set up

Virginia Davis, Secretary

Friends of Repton Parish Church (FRPC) was registered as a charity in 2015 to help conserve, repair and improve the building for future generations. But for various reasons it only got off the ground in 2020 during Covid 19 restrictions. Hence, instead of a grand launch, we started in a quiet way with sending letters out to those who might be interested in supporting us and attracting some initial interest.

Our first Birthday Event took place at St Wystan's Church in October 2021 which was a joyous occasion with children's choir, youth swing band, some talks about FRPC, plenty of refreshments and finally the switching on of the floodlights which with the help of some generous donations were funded by FRPC. At this event the Vicar

also mentioned the need for a font ewer and this has been donated from a specific donation from one of our subscribers.

Since that event we have hosted a saxophone concert, the first of what is planned to be an annual lecture, and a talk about the findings of the latest Vicarage Dig. We have planned a conducted tour of Anchor Church at Foremark with Prof Ed Simons, and a lecture in October further exploring Anchor Church in the wider context of other ancient rock cut buildings. We have also booked a Derby based brass band, Derventio Brass, for a concert in April 2024.

In addition, our Vice Chair, Richard Finch has been working on a new History and Guide Book for St Wystan's church, which we hope to publish early next year and one of our Trustees, Andy Austen, has been researching the copyright so we can reprint H M Taylor's three Repton Studies detailing the history of St Wystan's, originally published in 1977-1983, in an updated single volume presentation. Andy has also prepared storyboard sheets to help visitors appreciate their visit to the church more.

The number of signed up regular donors is 27 and we have a further 27 on our regular mailing list. If you don't already do so and would like to donate annually or more regularly you can do so by scanning the QR

code at the end of this paragraph. By donating now you will be helping us to be prepared for the next major expense on the church which Repton PCC needs our help with.



## Anchor Church

and

### Foremark Church

### Saturday 8th July

- 1.30 pm** Visit to St Saviour's church, Foremark with talk by Richard Finch
- 2.00 pm** Walk to Anchor Church Caves
- 2.30 pm** Introduction to the Caves followed by group tours led by Prof Ed Simons
- 3.45 pm** Return to Foremark and depart

This event is fully booked as we have had to limit numbers.

## Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> October

2 pm at St Wystan's Church  
Lecture by Prof Ed Simons

Subject: Anchor Church in the wider context of ancient Rock Cut Buildings

## Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> April 2024

7.30 pm St Wystan's Church  
Derventio Brass

Full details to follow on both these events

## THE VERY LAST DIG IN THE VICARAGE GARDEN?

About 50 people gathered at a hastily convened meeting to discover the findings.

**Andie Austen reports**

50 years ago Prof. Martin Biddle and Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle started a series of archaeological digs which, over more than a dozen seasons, revealed some very important aspects of our early history. This year saw the 4<sup>th</sup> season of renewed archaeological excavations in the Vicarage garden

On Maundy Thursday this year, on behalf of the Friends of Repton Parish Church and in time honoured fashion, Prof. Mark Horton gave us a trench-side talk on what had been found and initial thoughts on what it meant.



He reminded us that in the 660s an Anglo-Saxon Benedictine monastery had been founded in Repton following the arrival of Christianity a few years earlier. It was located in the area west of the church and probably running through the churchyard and vicarage garden to where the modern road is now.

Mark had still been a youngster when he joined the dig. He went on to supervise the excavation of the mysterious mound in the vicarage garden bearing a sycamore tree that Thomas Walker had briefly started to clear in the late 1600s thus revealing a mass grave. This turned out to be a Viking Charnel House reusing a small monastic mausoleum.

A dig in 2016/17 on the eastern side of the garden had unearthed a gravelled area probably used for industrial and maintenance work during the Viking occupation. In 2018 a ground penetrating radar survey suggested a large circular feature where the current trench is. Although this turned out to be caused by charcoal, the dig did reveal a gravel path to the charnel house and some Viking period finds, but the path was actually earlier and probably went to the building when a monastic mausoleum.

Two important features that emerged in 2018/19 were an arrangement of large stones and a row of grave cuts. The stones are now regarded as a Viking stone ship burial. They were carefully excavated but no remains were found.

The line of graves were clear when the 2019 season finished but there was no time to excavate them that year. One grave had been found when it was decided to excavate a midden (rubbish pit) and a skeleton was found at the bottom. Nicknamed Bob, his gender could be discerned but the bone was too degraded to get a date for him. His lower legs were in the bank of the trench. The intention to extend the pit and excavate the other graves had to be put on hold for 3 years due to the Covid19 virus.

Of the 9 grave cuts, most contained skeletons or parts of skeletons and no grave goods at all. The bone was in badly degraded condition and could not be lifted though some teeth were rescued and might just be able to provide dating evidence. The graves are very well organised and close together in a regularly spaced row but more likely to have been local inhabitants than monastic nuns and brothers. Buried below the later path, they must have been forgotten when it was laid and the find under it of a sceatt coin dated to the 740s suggests that the burials - undoubtedly Christian - are from the late 600s or early 700s though Mark did speculate that they might even be Roman.

If locals, then there may have been an early chapel run by the monastery for their use nearby and Mark did speculate as to whether the mausoleum might instead have been a chapel.

Running such digs is expensive and funding very difficult to come by and, now that the future of the site is in doubt, it will be necessary to try to get it protected as a scheduled ancient monument. So, even though there is more archaeology underground, this may very well be the last archaeological dig here.

It was good to see Prof. Martin Biddle here for a flying visit and we are very grateful to Mark for taking the time to give his talk.



## FROM THE ARCHIVES

### Rediscovering and restoring the crypt Part 2



We resume the story of how St Wystan's crypt has been managed over the last 100 years. Following the conservative repairs in 1912 described in the last Newsletter there is little mention of the crypt in parish records for another 40 years or so.

When the Conacher organ was replaced in 1949 by the much more compact Compton electronic instrument the south side crypt steps were opened up making it possible to replicate how pilgrims visiting Wystan's shrine progressed down steps on one side and up on the other. By the early 1950s there was evidently a serious problem with damp. The vicar writing to the church architect in August 1951 says *"[the crypt] is now locked and I am awaiting your letter to hear about treatment.."*. There then followed correspondence with experts about the best way to proceed. It's not clear what work was done apart from weatherproofing around the windows.

In 1959 there was a re-run of the 1912 proposals, planning to set up the crypt as a chapel. In September 1959 a faculty was granted for *"installing in the crypt a stone altar furnished with two bronze candlesticks and hanging on the wall behind such altar a cross of metal, stained glass and transparent enamels."* The cross was commissioned from Dennis Hawkins, Head of Art at Repton School. His work when installed caused controversy, admired by some for its modernity but deplored by others. In the event the project was not proceeded with and the crypt was cleared of these items prior to the Biddles' investigations from 1974.

Dr Harold Taylor's study of St Wystan's by the early 1970s had led him to dating the surviving crypt structure to the early/mid 9<sup>th</sup> century, at least 100 years earlier than previously thought. He came to believe that detailed archaeological investigation was needed to understand the significance and origin of the crypt. Having consulted the Biddles they began a campaign of summer excavations 1974-88. At the conclusion of these it was clear that a comprehensive conservation project was needed to secure this important Anglo-Saxon survival.

Martin Stancliffe of York was commissioned to report. His proposals included a French drain around the exterior draining to a sump with a pump to take water to the main drain in the School yard above to deal with the historic problem of damp ingress, repair and repointing of the stonework, and comprehensive conservation treatment of the interior stonework. There followed

prolonged consultation with the statutory conservation bodies and it was not until September 1992 that a faculty was granted for the work. Phase 1 was undertaken during 1993-4 involving the drainage scheme and stonework repairs. Phase 2 was a long period of environmental monitoring followed by Phase 3 - conservation work to stabilise the interior stonework. Work was completed in the autumn of 1997 at a total cost of about £80,000. Full details of the project are recorded in reports retained in the parish records (dated March 1995 and July 1999) to the Getty Foundation.

In 2005 it was proposed to enhance the crypt environment and improve access prior to the celebration of the 1350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the consecration of Diuma as first bishop of the Mercian area. It was planned to repair the access steps on both sides and install handrails, improve the lighting, renew limewash to the ceiling, and install a votive candle stand. In the event it proved impossible to secure agreement from the Diocesan Advisory Committee and statutory bodies and all that was done was to commission a wrought iron votive candle stand, a "Burning Bush" design devised by Peter Paine (the vicar) and Elizabeth Walker (the church architect) and made by Michael Groom.

More recently it has been possible to improve the lighting and re-limewash the ceiling improving the appearance of the crypt as it continues to draw visitors as a unique survival of Anglo-Saxon architecture.

Richard Finch