

Befriending Churches

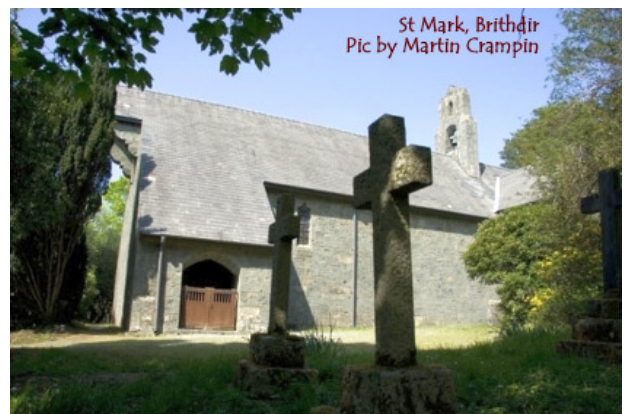
Words by Sue Houseago.

By 7.30pm last Thursday (17th February), every comfortable red plush chair in Stroud's part 16th century Old Town Hall was filled.

This week's talk, as our enthusiastic speaker Alec Hamilton confirmed, was to be a brief history of saving churches. We warmed instantly, in a time of government slashing, destruction and dismantling, to the notion of a society that had been formed to save!

We settled to hear that 'The Friends of Friendless Churches', was set up in 1957 by Ivor Bulmer-Thomas to save beautiful historic churches, some of them 1000 years old. Many of us spent our Sunday mornings in such churches, and some, very sadly, have seen them fall into disrepair. We have watched attempts to save or list these buildings overturned, and have seen beautiful houses razed to the ground and fine redundant churches turned to ugly offices or left to the elements.

Now, miraculously we sit and listen as Alec describes how, as churches become redundant, and are inevitably left to crumble and decay, the 'friends' take them on. Newcomers to the 'friends' are stunned! As simple as that - surely not? Yes, as Alec shows us, this sturdy group, together with dedicated patrons and helpers, begin by making these 'friendless churches' wind and watertight.



We heard nothing of conditions, restraints and rejections, only of acceptance and action. We saw slide after slide of breathtakingly beautiful churches surrounded



by oaks, sycamores and yew trees, lichen covered gravestones and splendid historic church interiors, many earmarked for demolition, brought back to life.

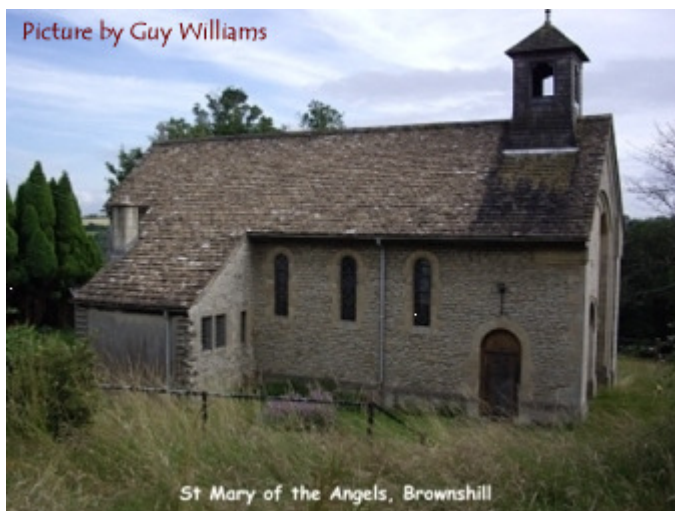
We saw the once neglected church, Brithdir, St Mark near Dolgellau, built in the late 1800s by a prolific architect Henry Wilson, revived.



At Matlock Bath we saw Louisa Harris's Chapel of St, John the Baptist's vaulted ceiling and stained glass, all saved by the 'friends', supported by charitable funding.



Stained glass detail at St John the Baptist
Pic by Peter Cormack



A recent proposal for the rescue of yet another friendless church – St Mary of the Angels, Brownhill - was excitingly just up the road!

The hour ended with Alec introducing us to a most beautifully illustrated book, 'Saving Churches', published to celebrate the 'friends' first 50 years' work. It is published by

Frances Lincoln Ltd and not surprisingly has a foreword by HRH The Prince of Wales. It is only in looking through this book that the truth of the society's astonishing accomplishments becomes apparent. How good it is to feel that in purchasing this book our money will go towards saving, in one way or another, another of these glorious churches.

How wonderful it will be, book in hand, to visit over the coming months these small befriended churches, many remotely sited in fields or on village edges. No need to make appointments, since, unbelievably, only some 6 of the 50 churches acquired are locked, the rest are open.

More exciting still the Friends, in their reviving of these churches, once centres of small rural communities, have found that they are coming back to life as places for meetings and village events and in some cases the Church Dioceses themselves are wanting them again!

We clapped loudly, as Alec finished describing the work of this optimistic group of extraordinary people who, scrambling over rough land and entering the cold, dark mouldering interiors of defunct churches have, for no reason other than they think it has to be done, saved so many wonderful churches