

# Friends of St Michael's Church Brent Knoll



## NEWSLETTER April 2015

Welcome to the first newsletter from the Friends of St Michael's Church. I apologise for the delay in getting this out to you but the Parish of Three Saints Parochial Church Council (PCC) has been very busy over the past few months and I have waited until various issues have been resolved before "putting pen to paper". Before doing this I want to thank you for becoming a Friend. Following our doorstep approaches last summer we recruited over 70 Friends and raised around £1200. This has been an excellent start.

This first newsletter is built around local news and an article on the Fox and Geese bench ends.

### News

#### ***Planned Annual Meeting***

We have now set a date for an Annual Meeting at St Michael's Church. This will be on Wednesday May 13th at 7.00pm. There will be light refreshments, including a glass of wine, and there will be an opportunity to ask questions about the Church and future developments. The main focus of the meeting will be the Church itself.

**John Page** has kindly agreed to take us round the Church to look at some of the most interesting historical features. As most people will know John has a wealth of local historical knowledge and has written a book on St Michael's that is built on original research. His session promises to be very interesting.

#### ***Managing the churches in the Parish of Three Saints***

When the new PCC was set up three years ago after the merger of Brent Knoll, East Brent and Lympsham parishes new administrative frameworks were set up. A central Buildings and Grounds Team was set up which is comprised of representatives from the three churches in the parish. St Michael's is represented by Tony Gilbert, who makes regular checks on the building and is regarded as the local "champion" and Mike Smith, one of our church wardens. Their main responsibilities are to ensure that the building remains sound, that it is serviced properly and to report any problems to the central Team. Decisions are then made on priorities and expenditure to keep the building sound. Tony and Mike spend a considerable time doing small scale repair work.

#### ***Update on St Michael's Church***

The most important issue that has arisen in the past year is a leak in the tower roof. Water was found to be dripping down onto the bells and the supporting woodwork. This clearly has to be rectified and estimates for replacing the lead roof have been obtained. The cost will be £25,000 and the parish has applied for various grants to cover the cost. We had hoped to obtain a Government grant to cover part of the work but we have just heard that our application has not succeeded in this round of funding.



We are uncertain how we shall proceed after this but it is possible that we shall include the north aisle roof in a larger project of re-roofing the church. Tony Gilbert will be able to update us on the position in relation to this project at the Annual Meeting. He will also report on other aspects of the building.

### ***Update on Parish developments***

There are two key issues that have been discussed that are relevant to Friends. The first is the process of what has been called “Re-pitching the Tent” and refers to the refurbishment of the Parish churches to make them fit for use in the modern world. This means ensuring that facilities such as toilets, reasonable cooking facilities and meeting rooms are built into the churches so that they can be used more effectively by the local, as well as the church, community. This could become a major project in the future but it is unlikely to happen until the churches have had some fairly major roof work to ensure that they remain structurally sound.

The second key issue is a shortfall in general Parish funds. It has taken sometime for the internal financial organisation of the Parish to be completed but we have now managed to split our funds into a general Church Life fund that covers day to day running costs and a Heritage fund that is divided into three accounts, one for each of the Parish churches. Maintenance work, insurance costs and capital building costs will be paid for out of this account. Unfortunately the deficit in the Church Life fund is significant and we have had to stop paying the Parish Share to the Diocese. This covers Simon Lewis’s salary so we need to be able to bridge this gap in order to remain in balance. This matter is being addressed urgently through a review of how we raise money from the current Parish congregation. The outcome of this review will not be known until the summer.

### ***St Michael’s Friends finances***

By contrast the St Michael’s Heritage fund is in good shape. A substantial sum, in the order of £25,000 is still in the capital account. We have done well over the past year raising funds (£1500) and we hope that this will continue. The Parish accounts for 2014 have now been published and I hope to be able to draw on these to provide a statement of accounts for St Michael’s Friends at the Annual Meeting.

### ***Future plans for Friends***

A major roofing project is likely to be the main focus of our attention over the next year or so, but we cannot forget the more mundane aspects of Friends activities. We will obviously try to build on the number of Friends that we currently have, but our first task will be to retain the Friends we have recruited in the last year (see next para). We will, of course, continue fund raising activities, which we hope will be attractive enough for you to support. Another priority will be to recruit people to help with day to day management of the church and the churchyard and help is always welcome on the cleaning front, both the church and the brass (contact either Frances James – 760691 or Margaret Smith 760803). If you are a handyman and would like to help Tony Gilbert please contact him on 760956.

### ***Renewing subscriptions***

Most of you agreed to set up standing orders at your bank, which will mean that we won’t need to contact you again for a subscription. Those who gave us a one off contribution will be approached again to see if you wish to continue as a Friend. We hope you will do so, ideally by setting up a standing order. If you have a computer it would also be helpful if you could supply us with an email address. This will enable us to save on printing costs and on time in distribution.

## **For your diary**

### ***Worle Wind Band on Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> July at Ivyclad Hall 2-5pm***

Frances James has kindly agreed to let the Friends hold a concert by the Worle Wind Band on her lawn. As well as a performance by the band in a delightful setting we will be providing cream teas. This should be a splendid afternoon.

### ***Moonlighting with Beethoven on Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> October 7.30pm – a talk by Brian Freestone***

For those who have enjoyed Brian’s last two talks on the lives of Mozart and Elgar this is an evening not to be missed. He will be supported again by John Page who will provide the “sound track”



# St Michael's Church Bench Ends – what is their origin?



The "foxy" abbot



The geese rebel



The fox is hanged

Doubtless everyone is familiar with the fox and geese bench ends in St Michael's. If you read the leaflet currently available in the church you will find out what must now be described as the "conventional wisdom" relating to their origin. But did you know that John Page, our local historian, has done some significant research into the history of St Michael's and he suggests an alternative account for their origin that is significantly different. In this article I will contrast these two accounts. In order to help orientate you I have included Bruce Wingate's splendid line drawings above.

First, here is an extract from the current description of the bench ends in the church:

*"There are three bench ends which are unique to Brent Knoll, and these are on the north side of the central aisle, opposite the Somerset Memorial on the south wall. These are believed to have been carved in the 14<sup>th</sup> century when the feudal system in England was on the decline, as was the respect of the people for the hierarchy of the Church. Although local priests were still popular, many critics began to feel that the Bishops, Abbots and Monks had become covetous, gluttonous and decadent. The fox in Bishop's clothing on these Bench Ends clearly indicates the disrespect of the people of South Brent (as Brent Knoll was then called) for the Abbot of Glastonbury, under whose jurisdiction this Church came, who was trying to lay his hands on the tithes of this then wealthy parish.*

*The first Bench End shows the Abbot as a fox, dressed in monastic robe and cowl, wearing a mitre, and holding a pastoral crook on which there is a fleece, indicating that he did not guard his 'flock' for nothing. At his feet are three swine heads protruding from cowls, evidently a sarcastic allusion to the low and brutal calibre of the Monks who look to the Abbot with approbation and respect. The Abbot appears to be addressing birds of various kinds – geese, an owl, a cock and hen, a crane and others – all in dutiful subordination to him. In the lower part of the panel, two apes roasting a pig on a spit depict gluttony, the ape on the left holding a plate and spoon and the other fanning the flames with bellows. At the top of the panel between two birds is another ape, chained and holding a moneybag, representing covetousness.*

*The centre Bench End shows an alteration in the state of affairs. One of the apes causes the geese to rebel and is sitting aloft wielding a baton, with which he enforces his instruction. The fox has been stripped of his robes of office and sits dismally with his legs in irons. In the lower panel the story of degradation is continued; the fox is now in the stocks, looking particularly woeful, and his mitre hanging derisively in front of him. He is guarded by an ape holding a battle-axe. At the top of the panel is a wise old owl.*

*The third Bench End shows the completion of the vengeance. Here the fox has been hanged by the geese and below him the watchdogs bark in triumph. At the top of the panel is a grinning head."*



## St Michael's Church Bench Ends – what is their origin? (cont)

You can see that this account leans heavily on the antagonism between the local clergy and people of South Brent (as it was known then) and the Abbot of Glastonbury and his monks. Was this antagonism real and could it have explained why such a scurrilous account appears like a “cartoon” in our local church? John Page challenges this notion and tries to fit the story into historical events that occurred around the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries during the time when the benches were thought to have been carved. He also questions the interpretation of the various birds and animals appearing in the three scenes.

So let us start with the history. Around the putative time of their carving the Abbot of Glastonbury, Richard Beere, was well respected and much loved by the clergy and local people. Furthermore, Bishop Fox, who could also have been the subject of the carvings, was a formidable figure who went on to become a Privy Councillor under Henry VIII. It is highly unlikely that local people would have made such a public statement of discontent about either person. It is far more likely that the story behind the benches originated in a historical dispute that caused one of the protagonists in the argument to commission the design of the benches. But what was this dispute? John reviews some possibilities and decides that the most likely dispute to cause offence between Abbot and Bishop was significantly earlier than the date originally ascribed to their carving.

Bishop Bekyngton paid a visitation to the Abbey in 1445 (rather like an OFSTED inspection) and found some unspecified irregularities at the Abbey, which was being run by Abbot Frome, an elderly man with poor eyesight. Unfortunately the Bishop was called away on urgent business and did not have time to ensure that penalties were imposed. In his absence the Abbott took matters into his own hands and imposed his own penalties. The Bishop was furious and the dispute escalated, eventually being presented to the Pope. There is no record of the final outcome but the Abbot continued in post until he died a few years later. John concludes that it is more likely that this story was the basis for the carvings and that they were made earlier than originally thought.

We then have to move on to the carvings themselves and what the various birds and animals represented. The first point to make here is that the quality of the carving is not very good, and John challenges some of the identifications made by previous commentators. For example the image above the fox in the first panel has been variously identified as a young fox and an imp. Our current description does not recognise that it is an ape, with which John agrees. It is in the second panel that John suggests a major revision of previous views. The figure in the top panel holding a scroll was thought to be an ape but John has noticed chevrons on his neck and suggests that it is, in fact, a lion, because the chevron was used as a representation of a lion in the medieval period.

Finally we have to consider the historical context and embed the story in contemporary imagery. What did the animals and birds signify? Did the cartoon draw on stories that were then popular? The answer here may be that the “cartoon” is based on the medieval stories about Reynard the Fox. He was considered to be a duplicitous character and, in the stories, often plays tricks on Chantecler the Cock, who appears in the first panel. The lion, known as King Noble, also appeared in the tales of Reynard.

So, taking all these views into account, what could the panels represent? A summary of John's view is as follows:  
**Panel 1** – the fox is likely to be Abbot Frome and the panel represents his state prior to the visitation by Bishop Bekyngton in 1445. He is posing as a bishop, which is clearly above his station, but the gullible geese have been taken in by this. Other birds and animals have not been taken in, and are predicting his downfall.

**Panel 2** – Reynard the fox is in chains and King Noble, the lion, has been brought into the picture to advise the geese. In the lower panel King Noble is conducting the trial of the fox (in chains). The suspended mitre suggests that the trial is about the Abbott usurping the Bishop's powers.

**Panel 3** – the trial goes badly and the fox is hung by the geese, suggesting that the Bishop has triumphed. In the lower panel John suggests that, rather than dogs waiting for a meal from the dead fox, the two animals are foxes that represent monks who are now confined to their quarters following the Abbot's defeat.

I have tried to provide a flavour of the research that John Page has done and written up in the book that was published for the millennium. Those who wish to read this will have to obtain a copy and this is not quite so easy these days because it is now out of print. John would like to update it and I would like to see it reprinted.

***Watch this space....***

