

News & Annual Report 2026



Supporting Churches in Essex and East London



Roofing and other repairs at The Hamlet Church, Duddenhoe End.

© Sarah Westerhuis

Inside this newsletter



Rachel Morley will give the Friends annual lecture on Thursday, 21st May. See page 12. Do bring a friend. The Lecture is open to non-members.

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The Friends of Essex Churches Trust 2025-26



Chairman's message



Martin Stuchfield

I highlighted the Trust's concern regarding the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme (LPWGS) in the 2025 'Chairman's message'. In April 2001 the Government, recognising the benefits provided by churches, introduced a scheme that enabled churches to recover the VAT that they had paid on repair bills. In 2024 the LPWGS Scheme had an annual budget of £42 million. Last year (very close to the deadline) the Scheme was extended for one year only but with a much-reduced budget of £23 million. It is most upsetting to report that our worst fears have been realised with the decision to scrap the Scheme. Worst still the Department for Culture, Media & Sport announced on 18th February 2026 that all funds had been allocated with a closure to all new applications. Places of worship are now subject to the full costs of VAT. A new support scheme (Places of Worship Renewal Fund) is being introduced that will have a budget of £92 million over four years with the details to be made available in April 2026. This new support is worth less than the previous Scheme due to the fact that projects will be subject to VAT at 20%.

The LPWGS having been in operation for almost a quarter of a century was easy to operate and well understood by volunteers managing church repair projects. The Scheme provided a high degree of certainty that VAT

would be recoverable. The Government has in effect introduced a tax on the nation's heritage requiring substantially extra funds to be raised in an inflationary environment in order to meet the costs of maintaining and repairing a listed church building. The decision is not a fair one since museums and galleries that do not charge admission are exempt from paying VAT on repairs.

The Trust has awarded £777,500 (£114,500 (2021), £178,500 (2022), £202,000 (2023), £159,000 (2024) and £123,500 (2025)) since the Covid-19 Pandemic. It is very pleasing to report that the practice of presenting certificates upon payment of a grant for the completion of repairs and improvements has been reintroduced. Presentations normally take place at a church service and it has proved to be exceptionally rewarding meeting parishioners and volunteers. It is hoped that certificates will be displayed in the church porch or other prominent location and will assist in promoting the existence of the Friends.

The Trust mourns the loss (last November) of one of its longest and most committed supporters. Thomas McMahon, Bishop Emeritus of Brentwood, had been involved with the Friends for more than sixty years most notably serving with considerable distinction as President from 2017-23.

I wish to thank our dedicated Trustees and the members of the Events and Grants Committees who willingly devote huge amounts of time to further the interests of our charity.

2026 represents the 75th anniversary since the Trust was founded and I wish to express my appreciation to all our Friends whose support has never been more valued and needed.

Martin Stuchfield
Chairman – Friends of Essex Churches Trust

2025 Events

An entertaining talk in Felsted Church on 25th March on *Ten Hidden Treasures in the Royal Collection*, by Nicola Turner-Inman, Curator of Decorative Arts for the Royal Collection Trust, was a sell-out, enabling us to raise nearly £3,000.

The AGM and Lecture at Rayleigh Church on 22nd May was thoroughly enjoyed by all, with plentiful refreshments preceding John Vigar's fascinating talk on *Exploring Essex Churches*.

Despite a damp start, 160 enthusiasts turned out for our Open Garden on 5th June at Gestingthorpe, to enjoy a truly spectacular garden, and an excellent afternoon tea. With its Captain Oates connection, the church was open for visitors to see his monument, and with £2,620 raised and £456 donated to Gestingthorpe Church, it was a great result all round.

The Essex Gift Fair at Chelmsford City Racecourse on 14th October was a great success, with a wonderful selection of stalls, plentiful refreshments, wreath-making demonstrations by Tangle & Thyme, and a delightful performance by the New Hall School Choir.



Nicola Turner-Inman, Curator of Decorative Arts for the Royal Collection Trust, enthralling the audience with her talk at Felsted in March 2025.

© Becky Willis

We appreciated the help of 17 extra volunteers, and with visitor numbers up 8%, and a surplus of £14,245, were delighted with the result. Gaining sponsorship is never easy in these challenging times, but we were grateful to Birketts LLP, Ceres Rural and JS Wright & Sons, with support from Fairfield Crisps, Frobishers and King & Co.

Our Christmas card, featuring a stained glass window from High Easter Church was extremely popular, selling out by early December.

Huge thanks must go to our amazing Events Committee for their hard work, energy and enthusiasm – Verity Barclay, Joss Crallan, Georgie Dwerryhouse, Clare Ford, Rachel Grainger, Catherine Leeder, Lance Lepper, Lucy Nicholls, Natalie Rowe, Jess Southwell, Olly Surguy and Becky Willis. Our gratitude as always to John Pickthorn and Martin Stuchfield for their continued support. We were all sad to see Lance step down from our Committee after 27 years' loyal service. We also acknowledge the help and support that many of our husbands and family members give at our events and at home with great tolerance and good humour.

During the year we were devastated by the sad passing of Catherine Sprott after a short illness. Since joining our committee, Catherine had quickly become a huge asset, with her willingness and positive attitude. She will be greatly missed by everyone, and our thoughts and prayers remain with her family.

Thank you so much for supporting our events and we look forward to seeing you during our 75th anniversary year.

Emma Brice

Chairman – Events Committee

Email: events@friendsofessexchurches.org.uk

Grants

We began 2025 with an allocation of £120,000, down from £220,000 in 2024 – a reflection of the challenging conditions under which we, like the churches we support, are currently operating. In the end we were able to offer grants totalling £123,500: twelve for repairs, totalling £85,500, and five for improvements, totalling £38,000.

All the beneficiaries were Anglican churches, with just one (St Patrick's, Barking) from that part of the Diocese of Chelmsford now in London. The churches on the list are nonetheless quite varied. St Patrick's was consecrated in 1940, built of brick, and the grant was for repairs to the round east tower. Although St Patrick's was listed Grade II in 2009, heritage significance is not a criterion for our grants; St John's, Outwood Common, Billericay, awarded a grant of £7,500 for roof repairs, was built in 1967-8 and is never likely to be listed. The roofing was of a type favoured at that time which has considerably exceeded its life expectancy, and we were glad to be able to support this active church which had made great efforts to raise the necessary funds.

At the other end of the scale is St Mary the Virgin, Saffron Walden, the largest parish church in Essex and one of the most architecturally distinguished. The current lighting does not do justice to such a magnificent building and is inadequate for a church that hosts a large number of concerts and other events which bring essential income; performers are unable to read their music, and they may simply go elsewhere. A proper lighting scheme in a building of this size and complexity is expensive – nearly £300,000 – but the parish's fund-raising efforts were exceptional. By the time we were approached there was a shortfall of only £6,603.50, so our grant was

modest, but we are proud to be associated with such a great effort. The money spent on what might appear to be a cosmetic improvement will undoubtedly turn out to be an investment in the church's continuing success.

All these achievements are relative, and it is in some ways easier for Saffron Walden to raise £300,000 than it is for the delightful thatched Hamlet Church, six miles to the west at Duddenhoe End, to raise a tenth of that amount. In spite of its rural location the church has a loyal congregation, but maintenance has slipped in recent years and the painted weatherboarding was badly in need of repair and redecoration. With the help of our grant the building is now in good shape once more, but looking after a church of this sort is a constant battle and much of the thatch will need renewing in the next five years.

We made one exceptionally large grant, to St Andrew's, Althorne. It is no exaggeration to say that this Grade II* listed church is in danger of collapsing if major repairs, including underpinning, are not carried out very soon. The church has been closed since 2023 due to serious structural movement and cracking. Work on this scale, estimated to cost about £1.3m, would be impossible without the support of the National Lottery Heritage Fund, but they have funded the development phase of the project and prospects for funding the delivery phase are encouraging. Evidence of local support is essential for unlocking NLHF funds and we very much hope that our offer of £25,000 will encourage not just the NLHF but also other grant-making trusts to come up with the money to save this building.

James Bettley
Chairman – Grants Committee
Email: jamesbettley@btinternet.com



Spire repairs at Manuden, St Mary the Virgin. © James Bettley

Application forms for grants are available from John Bloomfield

Email: john.bloomfield@btinternet.com or download from the website,
www.friendsofsexchurches.org.uk.

2025 Grant offers in full

Repairs

Beneficiary	Repairs	Amount
Aldham, St Margaret and St Catherine	General repairs including rainwater goods	£5,000
Althorne, St Andrew	Major repairs including underpinning	£25,000
Barking, St Patrick	Tower repairs	£5,000
Belchamp Walter, St Mary the Virgin	Floor repairs and damp treatment	£8,500
Billericay, St John the Divine (Outwood Common)	Roof repairs	£7,500
Bradwell-juxta-Coggeshall, Holy Trinity	Floor repairs	£1,000
Duddenhoe End, The Hamlet Church	Roof and other repairs	£7,500
Great Sampford, St Michael	Remedial work to damp	£5,000
Manuden, St Mary the Virgin	Spire repairs	£4,000
Mistley, St Mary and St Michael	Quinquennial repairs	£2,000
Rayne, All Saints	Roof and other repairs	£10,000
Theydon Bois, St Mary the Virgin	Brickwork repairs	£5,000
TOTAL		£85,500

Improvements

Beneficiary	Repairs	Amount
Chelmsford, St Andrew	Disabled access	£3,500
Heydon, Holy Trinity	Provision of servery with mains water and drainage	£12,000
Saffron Walden, St Mary the Virgin	Lighting system upgrade	£6,500
Wendens Ambo, St Mary the Virgin	Provision of servery and lavatory	£10,000
Wickham St Paul, All Saints	Provision of kitchen and lavatory	£6,000
TOTAL		£38,000
COMBINED TOTAL		£123,500



Major repairs including underpinning at Althorne, St Andrew. © James Bettley

2025 Ride+Stride

Foreboding skies threatened Ride+Stride this year with the day culminating in tumultuous thunderstorms across the county, nevertheless the stalwart participants raised an amazing £33,000, exceeding last year's total. 121 churches, also an increase on last year, made use of our website to advertise other events on the day, as well as offering a welcome and refreshments. Also encouraging, were an additional twenty-one churches, not involved in 2024, raising monies this year.

Gift Aid was an important addition, and alongside JustGiving, added over £7,000 to the money raised. Several people persuaded their employers to give matched funding, another valuable contribution to the total.

Those involved were very imaginative and used foot power, cycles, horses and ponies to get from church to church, and those who manned the churches obtained sponsorship for their hours welcoming and nourishing tiring participants.



A First? – Essex Ride+Stride attracts Knightsbridge cyclist. © Rachel Grainger

The Song Cycle sang motets in many places and raised an excellent sum; participants from seven churches each raised more than £1,000, and one church raised over £2,000!

Remarkable achievements considering our straitened times – heartfelt thanks to sponsors, and meet and greeters for their hard work, enthusiasm and cheerfulness, greatly appreciated by the remarkable participants, who continue to support the Friends come rain or shine.

Our capacity to make grants would be much diminished without their efforts and dedication. Despite intense competition each year for the Ride+Stride Fundraising Cup, St John's, Leytonstone retain the trophy for their outstanding effort of raising £2,340.

Our many beautiful places of worship need our help as never before so that our living heritage can thrive long into the future, benefitting others as we have benefitted. If you have time and energy and feel as passionate about Ride+Stride as I do, contact me and join the team – fresh and innovative ideas are always needed to propel this great event to new highs.

Please join us on Saturday, 12th September 2026 as once more we gather for another stupendous effort, in the charity's 75th anniversary year, to raise funds for our stunning church buildings, to ensure that others can appreciate the heritage and history of this wonderful county.

Rachel Grainger
Ride+Stride Organiser

Email: rideandstrideorganiser@friendsofessexchurches.org.uk

2025 Study Days

Friends of the Trust enjoyed two splendid Study Days in 2025, visiting churches in north and south-east Essex under the leadership of John Vigar.

The Spring Study Day on 7th May commenced at Rivenhall, St Mary and All Saints. The medieval church was considered to be 'a rude and unseemly structure' by Lord Western, the local squire. He commissioned the renowned architect John Asey Repton to remodel the building in 1838-9. The chief glory is the glass of c.1170-80 purchased in 1839 by Rev Bradford Denne Hawkins from the church at Chenu in France. The panels include frontal figures of archbishops, four roundels and most strikingly a knight in armour labelled Robert Lemaire.

The short distance was then travelled to the church of Cressing, All Saints. The four posts braced with timbers that support the belfry have been dated to 1388-1410 with the aid of dendrochronology. The medieval building underwent a significant restoration in 1868 by Frederic Chancellor. A fine monument on the south wall of the chancel depicts Anne Smith of Cressing Temple, d.1607, and husband Henry, kneeling with a daughter and baby in a cradle below.

A brass on the sanctuary floor commemorating Dorcas Musgrave, who died in childbirth on 11th August 1610, aged only 23, is unique in Essex. She is depicted seated upon on a stool, before a table, on which is a large hour-glass. Her right hand rests upon the hour-glass, while with her left she points to a swathed infant lying upon a tasselled cushion at her feet – the cause of her own early death. Her features are girlish, and the whole



Knight in armour labelled Robert Lemaire at Rivenhall, St Mary and All Saints.

© Martin Stuchfield

effigy is intended, without doubt, as an actual portrait.

Following lunch the isolated church at Bradwell-juxta-Coggeshall, Holy Trinity was visited. This building (that is at risk of being declared redundant) is a gem and constitutes one of the few where the fabric has survived intact from the medieval period. The 14th century wall paintings are of considerable interest and include the highly distinguishable figures of St Thomas and St James the Great. The 15th century screen, late 14th century decorated floor tiles, 12th century limestone font and two Maxey family monuments are a joy to behold.

Finally the church at Stisted, All Saints was visited. The church was rebuilt in 1844 for Onley Savill-Onley who presented the fragments of 15th, 16th and

17th century glass in the chancel windows. In addition to the Savill-Onley monuments one monumental brass remains in the chancel. This depicts a lady in paris head-dress kneeling at prayer desk with one daughter in the folds of her dress. The inscription records that the brass commemorates Elizabeth, daughter of John Glascock of Roxwell and wife of John Wyseman. She died in 1584.

The Autumn Study Day on 8th October focused on four churches located in the south-east corner of the county. The day began at Rochford, St Andrew where the church is located with the Hall and surrounded by a golf course in close proximity to the eastern end of the



Monumental brass commemorating Thomas Stapel, d. 1371, at Rochford, St Andrew. © Martin Stuchfield

London Southend Airport runway. The glorious west tower constructed of Tudor red brick bears the arms above the west door of Thomas Butler, Earl of Ormond who died in 1515. Located at the base of the tower and abutting the north wall is a substantial slab of Purbeck marble containing the greater part of the armoured figure of Thomas Stapel, or de Stapel, who was Serjeant-at-Arms to Edward III and died in 1371. The brass was originally located at Shopland (a church that was slightly damaged during World War II, not repaired and demolished in 1957) and moved to nearby Sutton. Upon this church being declared redundant the brass and slab was considered of such importance that a final move to Rochford was completed in 2018.

From Rochford the short distance was travelled to Eastwood, St Laurence and All Saints. The church has been described as “one of the finest and most important small medieval churches in South Essex, and of exceptional architectural, archaeological and historical significance”. It is located adjacent to the perimeter of London Southend Airport and thankfully proposals in 2001 to extend the runway and move the Norman church out of the way, by using rollers or stilts did not come to fruition. The font is one of the best examples from the late Norman and Early English period. However, it is the doors with ironwork of c. 1170-80 that are the chief glory. Remarkable survivals with the horizontal strap of the south door bearing an inscription in Lombardic letters which reads in translation “May peace rule those entering and also those leaving”.

Hockley, SS Peter and Paul commanding an elevated position above the River Crouch was visited immediately after lunch. The 14th century west tower is curious with the lower stage being



Hockley, SS Peter and Paul. © Martin Stuchfield

square and solid; but where the buttresses end it becomes octagonal.

The building dates from the 13th and 14th centuries albeit it was subjected to an extensive restoration in 1842-3. The large octagonal 14th century font fashioned from Purbeck marble is especially fine. By way of an added bonus the chalice of 1562 with band of ornament was displayed.

Finally the day concluded with a visit to Rayleigh, Holy Trinity where a major reordering scheme including heating, lighting and improved access costing more than £600,000 was completed in 2021. The church is mainly constructed of ragstone with the substantial west tower recorded as being under construction in 1396.

The body of the church was rebuilt in the late 14th and early 15th century to create a very wide and unencumbered appearance. The one surviving brass that was formerly located in the nave, moved into the north aisle and ultimately mounted vertically in a recess in the parish centre corridor depicts a headless civilian and his wife. It is possible that the effigies represent John Barrington, who died on 8th November 1416, and his wife Thomazine, who died on 25th September 1420 albeit the costume and style of engraving dates to some 35 years later. Tea ended a most interesting day.

Thanks are due to John Vigar and the incumbents and churchwardens of all the churches visited.

Upcoming events

WEDNESDAY, 6TH MAY – Spring Study Day

Our next study day, led by John Vigar, will visit the churches at Ardleigh, Boxted, Little Horkesley and Wormingford. Tickets are £15.00 for members and £20.00 for non-members. Payment is preferred via BACS using reference “Spring Study Day” (sort code: 20-19-95, account no.: 60427888) or enclose a cheque made payable to Friends of Essex Churches Events Committee and send to: Martin Stuchfield, Pentlow Hall, Pentlow, Essex CO10 7SP. Email: martinstuchfield@pentlowhall.uk Please see website for booking form.

THURSDAY, 21ST MAY – Spring Meeting including AGM and Lecture

Our Lecturer for 2026 will be Rachel Morley who is a building conservator and currently Director of the Friends of Friendless Churches. The lecture is entitled *Saving Churches in Essex: What we've learned in 51 years*. St Andrew's Church, Church Road, Hatfield Peverel, Essex CM3 2LE at 8.15p.m., following the Annual General Meeting at 7.00p.m. and refreshments from 7.30p.m. Open to members and non-members; admission free. Please email jejpickthorn@gmail.com for further information; it would help us to know if you are planning to attend so that it is possible to gauge numbers for refreshments.

TUESDAY, 4TH JUNE – 75th Anniversary Celebration

6.00p.m.–8.30p.m. A celebration at Birch Hall (near Colchester) to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Friends of Essex Churches Trust. Please see invitation enclosed.

SATURDAY, 12TH SEPTEMBER – Ride+Stride

9.00a.m.–5.00p.m. Take part in our sponsored cycle ride and walk. Visit unique churches, have fun with the family, enjoy some gentle exercise, and have a great day out in aid of a good cause. Download sponsorship and other forms from www.friendsof Essex churches.org.uk/ride-stride and create your own fundraising page on www.justgiving.com/foect.

WEDNESDAY, 7TH OCTOBER – Autumn (20th Century Churches) Study Day

Details to follow.

TUESDAY, 13TH OCTOBER – Gift Fair

The Essex Gift Fair in The Summer Marquee at Chelmsford City Racecourse, Chelmsford CM3 1QP is the perfect place to meet friends and start your Christmas shopping. 10.00a.m. – 3.00p.m. Light lunches will be available. Advance tickets will be available from TicketSource.co.uk.

Find full and updated details of events on www.friendsof Essex churches.org.uk/events.

Membership

It is with regret that I report that income from donations and subscriptions for the year decreased to £23,665 (2024: £28,413) albeit the amount of tax reclaimed via gift-aid increased to £2,671 (2024: £2,258).

I realise that many of you will have paid your subscription by Standing Order. Others may have paid by BACS or sent a cheque. For everyone else, now is the best time to renew. We do not routinely acknowledge subscriptions but please accept our thanks now.

Thankfully the Trust has benefitted from the hard work and ingenuity of the Events Committee and from legacies received. The latter are obviously unpredictable but over the last ten years the Trust has received a staggering £500,000 from legacies. Please consider remembering us in your Will, as bequests to a registered charity are exempt from Inheritance Tax. You may not be aware that an estate can pay Inheritance Tax at a reduced rate of 36% if 10% or more is left to charity in a Will.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any queries or questions relating to membership.

Subscriptions and Gift Aid

Subscriptions are received throughout the year with Gift Aid claimed on a large percentage thereby benefiting the work of the Trust.

Gift Aid is claimed against UK taxpayers only and for every £1 claimed an extra 25 pence is reclaimed by the Trust. For example, a subscription of £20 means that £5 can be reclaimed.

If you, as a subscriber, are unsure whether or not Friends of Essex Churches is claiming Gift Aid against your subscription, then please do not hesitate to contact me.

Verity Barclay
Membership Secretary

Email: membership@friendsofessexchurches.org.uk

2025 Summarised accounts

Statement of financial activities for the year ended 31st December 2025

2024 £'000		2025 £'000
30.7	Donations and subscriptions	26.3
1.0	Legacies	55.0
32.2	Fundraising – Ride+Stride	32.8
33.0	– other events	36.0
16.1	Dividends and interest	16.9
113.0	Total income	167.0
(3.4)	Governance and support costs	(3.1)
(14.5)	Ride+Stride – returned to churches	(13.4)
(11.0)	Other events – fundraising expenses	(16.2)
(2.6)	Promotion of public interest in churches	(2.1)
(153.5)	Grants for work payable to churches	(123.5)
(185.0)	Total expenditure	(158.3)
(72.0)	Net (expenditure)	8.7
6.4	Unrealised gain on investments	43.6
(65.6)	Net movement in funds	52.3

Summary balance sheet as at 31 December 2025

2024 £'000		2025 £'000
251.7	Investments – market value	295.3
128.3	Cash and deposits	125.1
380.0	Total assets	420.4
(134.5)	Undrawn allocated grants	(122.0)
(2.6)	Accruals	(3.3)
242.9	Net assets represented by	295.1
242.9	General Fund (unrestricted)	295.1
242.9	Total funds	295.1

Treasurer's report

The total funds of the Trust stand at £295,144 (2024: £242,839).

In 2025 a total of £136,000 (2024: £155,000) has been paid out in repair and improvement grants for the benefit of 21 different churches – quite a sum albeit marginally lower than the previous year.

Thank you for being a member, attending our events and participating in Ride+Stride

– the churches that receive grants from the Trust are always most grateful.

For more details please see the summarised accounts on page 14.

Jo Pimblett
Treasurer

Email: treasurer@friendsofessexchurches.org.uk

Legacies

We are hugely grateful for the bequests we have received over recent years. They have enabled the Grants Committee to repair and restore on a much larger scale.

Please do remember The Friends of Essex Churches Trust in your Will – a great

cause with the added bonus that it can reduce your liability to Inheritance Tax.

Please contact the Treasurer if you would like advice on suitable wording:
Jo Pimblett, Parsonage Bury, Henham, Bishops Stortford CM22 6AN. Email: treasurer@friendsofessexchurches.org.uk

The Friends of Essex Churches Trust 2025-26

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Provision of servery with mains water and drainage at Heydon, Holy Trinity. © Martin Stuchfield



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