**Ride + Stride 2021 – 11th September.**

Ride + Stride must resume. We are all longing to get back to normal life, and do the things we used to do before this wretched pandemic struck, and taking exercise in the fresh air is one of the best ways of avoiding the effect of the virus. As I write (15th July 2021), the official DCMS guidance for grassroots sports in England says “Staying active is a vital weapon against COVID-19, which is why people will always be able to, and encouraged to, exercise even during periods of tough restrictions. People should try to ensure they exercise regularly in a way that suits them, as physical activity plays a vital role in both our physical and mental wellbeing.” Riding one's bike, or merely striding in the great outdoors, in the early weeks of September, when the days are still reasonably long, and before the winter bugs start arriving, ought to be just what the doctor ordered.

And who hasn’t missed our great county churches during this hiatus? Far too many have been closed up and forgotten about, overlooking the reasons that they were built in the first place. Essex churches, in addition to being of aesthetic and architectural merit, are there to be the centre of their communities, as well as a place of worship. The authorities decided it was too difficult to allow these buildings to be open for much of the last year, but as our confidence returns, we can all be hopeful that our churches can return to their pre-eminent cultural position, as well as their prominent physical position in our towns and villages.

However, we cannot forget that this virus is not yet defeated. The DCMS guidance referred to above refers to restrictions on some activities and settings in order to limit social contact and reduce transmission. Although many of our churches intend to reopen as before, some are not yet comfortable with the concept of a myriad of cyclists and other athletes passing through their doors and creating potential hygiene issues. This is especially the case for churches that offer refreshments and/or toilet facilities, but even the handling and signing of forms is something that can be regarded as possibly unhygienic. Further, the arrival of new variants, the expected rise in confirmed cases on account of other relaxations, and the probable return from overseas travel by a number of younger participants who have not yet been fully (double) vaccinated all create concern for church wardens. On top of all that, Essex, including parts of the East End of London, faces unique difficulties arising from the more metropolitan parts, which statistically are shown to hasten the spread of the virus. This makes planning cycle routes, especially in the south of the county, difficult, as several churches are unable to commit to opening until much nearer to the date, if at all

Friends of Essex Churches Trust has a particular reason for wanting the Ride + Stride to resume after missing out last year. It has been a significant fundraiser in the past, and there is every expectation that the county's churches will have reason to seek our help in the next few months and years. We would encourage those churches that can open on September 11th to do so, and those riders and striders who can do so to take part in what is always an interesting and enjoyable occasion. They should exercise the usual common sense, and should be prepared to find that some churches which have been welcoming in the past are unable to do so this year. However, in common with the national organisers, I am confident that the benefits of participating in the Ride + Stride will far outweigh the risks.

Any questions, contact me at jejpickthorn@gmail.com.

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