

## **Report by Julia Abel Smith DL to the Annual General Meeting of the Friends of Essex Churches Trust - 14 May 2009**

Our whole purpose as a Trust is, of course, to raise and grant funds for the repair and restoration of churches and chapels, and last year the Grants Committee, capably chaired by David Lodge, gave nearly £200,000 in grants to 24 places of worship, with the largest amount, £20,000, going to All Saints, Walton for help with subsidence.

We raise money in a number of ways and one of the most enjoyable is through our biannual Study Days, which for the last ten years have been expertly run by Dr. James Bettley. For his final outing, last week he guided us round five of his favourite churches, including Layer Marney and Little Braxted. James is now handing over to Christopher Starr, a worthy successor, who has already edited a guide to Essex churches and is an expert on the 18<sup>th</sup> century historian and Essex clergyman, Philip Morant.

Our Events Committee, under the imaginative guidance of my Vice-Chairman, Claire Cottrell, with whom I have much enjoyed working, continues to work very hard and we all enjoyed the fund-raising tea party at the home of last year's High Sheriff, Sarah Courage. The Christmas Fair, run by Katie Griffith-Jones and Diana Thompson, was a great success in our new venue: Hylands House, Chelmsford. I warmly recommend it to you, so please put this year's date, Wednesday, 21<sup>st</sup> October, in your diaries.

The Trust is always grateful for the annual cheque that we receive from the Southend Group, via their Chairman, Don Woracker; and it is a great pleasure to see you all here today. At the end of March, I joined the Group for an outing to Ardleigh and Wrabness, the church with incomparable views over the River Stour. I really enjoyed myself and we were given a magnificent tea at Wrabness Village Hall, provided by the ladies of the W.I.

When Fiona Nelmes accepted the job of organising the annual Ride & Stride, I breathed a sigh of relief. Predictably, she worked quietly and efficiently and raised the splendid sum of £109,000 last September. This year we are trying out *justgiving.com* and we are in the process of setting up a link on our website, which will enable sponsors to donate online. Fiona has already got her personal *justgiving.com* page up and running, and yesterday I proudly became her first online sponsor.

Whilst on the subject of the Ride & Stride, I should like to pay tribute to two of the hardest working, but modest, members of our team: Beryl and Ray Clements. At their home in Great Baddow, they make sense of the stacks of grubby, crumpled and often illegible sponsor forms. They pay in numerous cheques, deal with complicated enquiries and formulate our Gift Aid return, before it is forwarded to the Inland Revenue by our Gift Aid Secretary, Alastair Stewart.

As well as organising the day to day running of the Trust's finances, which is no small task especially in today's economic climate, our supportive and ever-helpful treasurer, Ian Dudley, has produced a Legacy leaflet, which will be sent to our members in the next month or so.

One aspect of our work which has been exercising the Executive is that of promoting our Trust. Whenever I go to meetings of the National Churches Trust in London, I find that they encounter the same problems that we do, albeit on a

national scale. Ralph Meloy, our Press Officer, prepared a paper on promotion for us and, with his assistant, Sarah Brown, has worked hard at obtaining media coverage when grants are given, and organising short talks about the Trust, to important groups, such as the Deanery Synods.

As part of this campaign, Keith Gardner, our Membership Secretary, has been very keen to broaden our membership. I know how delighted he was when at an event at Ingatestone Hall last month, masterminded by Marisa Petre, we added nearly 40 new members to our ranks. Not only is Keith our Membership Secretary, but he also conscientiously fulfils the role of Secretary to the Trust and I am truly grateful to him for wearing both hats so effectively.

As a Trust we are *very* fortunate in our three patrons. They are not just names at the top of the writing paper, for they actively support us. I know that it was Lord Petre's charming speech at Ingatestone that persuaded so many new members to sign up. Bishop Thomas McMahon kindly launched last year's Ride & Stride at Epping Upland, and Bishop John Gladwin is holding a reception for committee members next week. Our President, George Courtauld, whose presence lends lustre and humour to our meetings, is likewise a great help. For all the support that they so willingly give us, I would like to say thank you.

I have not been able to mention all members of the grants, events and advisory committees who beaver away making an enormous contribution but I am most grateful to each of them, and I would single out Tim Pratt who has recently retired after many years' service as Treasurer of the Events Committee.

I conclude by quoting from a *Sunday Times* article on *A Heritage in Danger* written in the early 1950s by Sir Arthur Bryant, soon after our Trust was founded:

*The wealth of artistic treasure that [our churches] represent, with their sculpture and carving, screens and roof-bosses, coloured glass and plate, brasses, bells and wall-paintings, is incalculable.*

*This heritage of hallowed beauty is available to the entire nation. There is no charge for its enjoyment ... It is taken for granted, but its maintenance makes incessant demands on the limited means of the Church and of churchgoers.*

“Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.” The battle continues, but I know, having worked for the Friends of Essex Churches Trust over the last few years, that we shall **not** be defeated.