

STAFFORDSHIRE HISTORIC CHURCHES TRUST - THE FIRST 50 YEARS

The origins of the Trust go back to 1952. The first recorded entry of income is £10.00 On 3 June 1952. It can only be assumed that the first meeting took place sometime around that date.

The first recorded payment is 7 October 1952 and was for a grant of £100 to St. Michael and All Angels Church, Hamstall Ridware.

The Trust Deed establishing "The Friends of Ancient Staffordshire Churches" as a registered charity is dated 21 July 1953 and was signed by the Suffragan Bishop of Stafford; plus Rt. Hon. Caryl Bagot and Major E J Hardy. The first President was The Right Hon. Baron Bagot.

The first accounts cover a period from 3 June 1952 until 31 December 1953 and show a total income of £2012.7s.4d. The minimum annual subscription in the early years was 5 shillings.

An early driving force was Mr S A Jeavons FSA who was one of the founders and the first Secretary. His enthusiasm in the early years along with help from many of his friends produced some impressive results. A series of exhibitions were mounted in the early years in a number of towns including Bilston, Burton-on-Trent, Lichfield, Wednesbury and Wolverhampton. Some of these were supported with plays, concerts and pageants. Over 8000 people in total visited the exhibitions.

These together with other fund raising efforts, raised £1728 in the years up to April 1956. When added to membership subscriptions, these helped achieve a total income of just under £5,000 in the first few years.

In 1962 an appeal on behalf of The Friends was made on the BBC radio programme "The Weeks' Good Cause" by Sir Charles Wheeler KCVC, President of the Royal Academy. The text of his appeal is in the archives. In a letter to the then Archdeacon of Stoke, Sir Charles comments that "...one contribution is of four 3d stamps and one is for 100 guineas...." The total raised by the appeal was £702.

In 1965 the Archdeacon of Stafford, Ven. B. Stratton presided over the AGM at Wightwick Manor at which it was reported that since its establishment The Friends had provided nearly £9,000 for restoration of churches in the County. The Secretary, Mr. John Roper reported that support was generally good in the South of the County, but was not so strong in the North.

However, for various reasons the initial enthusiasm waned and The Friends went into what can perhaps best be described as 'abeyance' for some considerable time. In ten years from 1967 to 1976 total income was £5,707 of which member's subscriptions totalled £1,437. In 1979 it became obvious that membership and income were declining. Serious discussions took place with a view to closing down "The Friends". The situation was not helped when the Hon Treasurer resigned in late 1979 after ten years in the post and then a little over a year later the death occurred of the Hon. Secretary after 22 years in that role.

The loss of these two key people in a comparatively short space of time presented the Committee of the day with a great challenge. However, following lengthy discussions, it was decided to make one last 'push' in an effort to revive the flagging fortunes. The Committee was strengthened and in view of the parlous state of affairs, in 1981 the role of treasurer and secretary were combined. At that time total membership was less than 100. A series of promotional activities were started including a 'Find-a-Friend' appeal in which each existing member was encouraged to persuade at least one of their friends to join.

In 1982 the name was changed to Staffordshire Historic Churches Trust. A sponsorship scheme was launched in which each current member was asked to sponsor (i.e. pay the subscription for) at least one of their friends for one year.

To celebrate the 30th anniversary in 1983 a book was published 'A Guide to Some Staffordshire Churches'. This sold well and helped to make the Trust's name more widely known. (It is now out of print). By the end of that financial year (April 1984) membership had grown to 239 and total income for that year was £4,481 which was a record, and the highest ever grant to a single church of £450 was paid.

Mr. Pat Hughes took over the role of Hon. Secretary in 1985 when the roles of Hon. Treasurer and Hon. Secretary were again separated and in 1987 he was the driving force behind the inauguration of the Sponsored Cycle Ride. This event has produced over £118,000 (including a record £9,000 in the year to April 2003) for Trust funds with a similar amount going to churches throughout the County.