



The Friends of Tewkesbury Abbey

Newsletter – December 2025

From the Chair

Dear Friends

If you were able to attend our AGM, held in June, you will know that there were some significant changes in membership of Friends' Council again this year. The Revd Charles Whitney, a member of Council for seven years, including being Chair for the last 12 months, stood down due to the level of his other commitments. It was the first of my tasks, as Chair, to thank him for the effort and dedication he put into the role. Charles showed us that the saying, "if you want a job doing, give it to a busy person," has a lot of truth in it. We wish Charles well in his authorship and, particularly, in the effort he is putting in to the first revision of his book, *A History of Tewkesbury Abbey*.



We also welcomed Dr Nancy Oakes in her new role as Vice Chair. Nancy has much experience of the needs of the Abbey, having recently completed a four-year spell as a Churchwarden. Although new to the role of Vice Chair, Nancy has been a Friend for many

years and an ex-officio member of Council during her time as a Churchwarden.

I am pleased to say that Nigel Bennett remains as our Treasurer again this year. His experience, and that of all the members of our Finance Committee, is exceptional for a charity of our size.

Last, but not least, Jennie Clifford was elected to Council as a new member. Jennie is one of the Abbey Guides so you may have heard her on one of the tours. I hope she enjoys her time on Council and finds it as rewarding as I have.

Sadly, the AGM marked the time when some stalwarts of the Friends completed their time on Council: Andrew Crowther, Hugh Sweet and Sylvia Lancelot. It is difficult to overstate what they have done for the Friends. Amongst other things, Andrew was Vice Chair for over 20 years and Hugh was Treasurer for 14 years. Sylvia has been very active on our Events Committee, and she has now agreed to be co-opted back on to that committee and will continue her support in that way, despite no longer being a Council member.

The AGM was followed by our traditional Festival Outing. The Events Committee had found a fascinating baroque church for us to visit, and the day was enjoyed by all who were lucky enough to go. More on this, and the autumn Coro Camino event, later.

The AGM also saw the culmination of work, over an 18-month period, to make changes to our Constitution. The changes were presented in detail in the 2025 Annual Report and they had already been approved by Friends' Council and the Abbey Parochial Church Council, but they needed the final approval of those present at a Friends' AGM. The changes actually returned the aims to those stated at the inception of the Friends, over 90 years ago. Our governing document now can be summarised as saying the Friends' purpose is to assist the PCC in maintaining the Fabric and Adornments of the Abbey. This provides a clear distinction between the Friends and the Abbey's Foundation charity, which supports Ministry, Music and Maintenance. The motion was passed

unanimously. Incidentally, 'adornments' in this context can be quite wide ranging. It can include any architectural features intended to make the building more visually attractive – rather than purely for structural purposes – and elements added as part of the function of the building, such as the Chantries and many old monuments.

The Covid pandemic affected the funding of the Abbey severely. The once-steady stream of visitors came to a halt and congregation size fell. The Friends' income was more resilient and we did what we could to support the day-to-day running of the Abbey. Increased grants were made to cover costs of essential maintenance and, while at a slightly lower level but still high, we have agreed to keep these in place until the end of 2026. This has, however, had a big impact on our general funds. Not only will that level of grant be unsustainable going forward but it impacts what we can do in our primary purpose: helping with costly repairs to the fabric. At over 900 years old, a building like the Abbey, and its many historically significant monuments, requires attention that does not come cheap. We needed to increase our funds in order to be in a position to help when repairs are needed, and to do that, we constantly need new members.

One of the primary aims of the Friends for several years now has been to grow awareness of our organisation and to recruit more members. One of the ways we have approached that was to redesign our website and to extend its capabilities. We added a financial connection so that new Friends can now join online and pay for their membership at the same time. This immediacy is something we have come to expect in the internet age, and it is certainly helping us welcome new Friends. It is also now possible to make donations through the website and to purchase tickets for our events.

We are running a low-level campaign to spread the word that all subscriptions and donations are worth 25% more to the Friends if the donor is in a position to make a Gift Aid Declaration. For donors who pay tax, including tax on savings, this can be done online or by

contacting us by post or email. It makes a big difference to us as we claim that 25% directly from HMRC – with no effort required on the part of the donor. If you would like to know more, please contact me.

The income from subscriptions and donations has historically been low compared to the funds received from bequests. The Abbey has a long history of great benevolence from its Friends. The motivation may have changed from that in pre-Reformation times but many who spend time in the Abbey want to help preserve this magnificent building. Those bequests still arrive, and while they do, we will be able to help.

I can't finish without mentioning our Secretary and Administrator, Karen Vincent. Karen has been the person making all these improvements to our IT and who has kept the organisation running smoothly behind the scenes. Her contribution to the Friends is enormous. Having put into place a sophisticated members database and a website, all at minimum cost to the Friends, we are now in a better position than many other similar charities in the UK. This has come at a time when it has become necessary for Karen to relocate and we will no longer have her on our doorstep and able to respond to almost any request. No one person is going to be prepared, or able, to replace all that Karen has been doing. You can read more about what we are doing about this in Gareth Hill's summary later in this newsletter. I am delighted to add that although Karen is leaving Tewkesbury she is not deserting the Friends. She is hoping to still play an active part and will still be available for emergency IT support!

This is a common theme with Friends' supporters: they keep on giving. I started by explaining that our previous Chair is moving on, as did Graham Finch, Chair for 10 years before Charles, but both are still very much involved. Similarly, Andrew and Hugh, who moved on from their posts as Officers of Council, are still actively helping. The Abbey continues to inspire people to help care for it. My thanks to all who are involved locally and to all of you, our Friends and supporters around the globe.

Friends in need: An update

The May Newsletter included a plea for assistance with the administration of the Friends. Here is a brief update on progress.

First the good news. The handover of management of the membership database has started and is making good progress. It makes sense to include management of communications with members in this, so that is what we propose to do. Discussions are also ongoing to fix the gap in providing at least some of the technical support that running the Friends requires. Some of the financial administration tasks are also now covered by new arrangements.

This still leaves a number of areas that still require a willing volunteer, namely:

- secretarial support (minute-taking and pre-meeting collation of relevant paperwork) to Council meetings, including the AGM
- publicity – general and event-specific (this might be a suitable task for a small group on an ad hoc basis).

If you feel able to help out with any of these tasks, even those on which we are making progress, please do get in touch.

Witley Court baroque church

The Friends Festival Outing was a splendid visit to this magnificent estate, which once served as the home of the Dudley family and is a remarkable example of Victorian grandeur. Although the mansion was ravaged by fire in 1937, its impressive ruins still tell the story of its former splendour.

Our time there focused on the magnificent baroque church. It suffered a period of neglect until 1965 when an extensive restoration programme was started by parishioners. It now displays a splendour that is unique amongst country churches in Britain. It has exquisite gilded decorations throughout, ceiling paintings by Antonio Bellucci, 10 painted glass windows by Joshua Price and splendid carved woodwork.



There is an impressive organ with wonderful acoustics, and we were treated to a beautiful recital by our own James Lancelot.

An extra highlight of the trip was an exclusive tour of the crypt, an area generally closed to the public. This atmospheric space houses the grand granite sarcophagus of Lord Dudley.

The weather was fine and we enjoyed a delightful lunch in the extensive gardens. A pleasant day enjoyed by all.

Coro Camino – Rafael Bellairs

A wonderful evening with Coro Camino at Tewkesbury Abbey

On Wednesday 12th November, the Friends enjoyed a truly memorable evening of music, fellowship and joy, thanks to a marvellous performance by Coro Camino.

Coro Camino is a small, four-part choir of around 12 singers formed in 2019. The group brings together two passions they all share: a love of singing and walking. Every member also sings with Philomusica of Gloucestershire and Worcestershire – a larger choir of some 80 voices. Both ensembles perform a rich mixture of sacred and secular music, but Coro Camino is unique in that their performances often take place as part of pilgrimages, combining spiritual journeying with the joy of song.

This talented choir delighted everyone with an inspiring programme of 18 pieces, featuring works by Vangelis, John Rutter and Edward Elgar. The concert concluded beautifully with 'Irish Blessings' – composed by our very own Friend, Linda Parsons – and sung as the perfect finale to a glorious evening.



Guests were seated around tables, enjoying refreshments and delicious nibbles, thoughtfully chosen by Sue Coulton and Linda Parsons; our sincere thanks to them both. The relaxed and friendly atmosphere encouraged everyone to join in.

During the evening, Nancy Oakes spoke eloquently about the Friends of Tewkesbury Abbey and the vital role our members play in supporting the ongoing care and preservation of this magnificent building. Thanks to the generosity of Friends past and present, we have been able to contribute to masonry and roof repairs, the enhancement of interior lighting, and the restoration of the Milton Organ, in addition to many other areas of maintenance and improvement throughout the Abbey. These efforts ensure that this sacred and historic space continues to inspire, welcome and serve all who enter for generations to come.

This was also a special Friends recruitment event, offering non-members six months' free membership as part of the £10 ticket price. At the time of writing, numbers are still being finalised, but we are delighted to have already welcomed over 16 new Friends into our growing community. Welcome all!

The evening closed with words of heartfelt thanks from Graham Finch, who reflected on his own Camino pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. He spoke movingly of the emotion and sense of glory felt when standing before the great Cathedral at journey's end, a moment of awe, gratitude and unity that beautifully echoed the spirit of Coro Camino's music and message. His words perfectly

captured the feeling of shared purpose and joy that filled the hall.

Finally, our deepest thanks to Coro Camino for allowing us the pleasure of listening to their beautiful singing and sharing in their journey. It was an evening of music, fellowship and inspiration, and a celebration of both the Abbey and the wonderful community of Friends who help it flourish.

Fitzhamon lecture 2026

Join us for the annual Fitzhamon lecture on Saturday 25th April 2026.

Professor Martin Heale, Professor of Late Medieval and Reformation History at the University of Liverpool, will be delivering the lecture on "Tewkesbury Abbey in the Late Middle Ages".

Website and contact details

The Friends website offers information on the work of the Friends and events that we organise. But more than this, it allows those interested in supporting this magnificent building to make donations or join us as an Annual or a Life member. These subscriptions and donations allow the Friends to continue providing funding for the preservation of Tewkesbury Abbey.

There are Friends' private pages. These contain articles written by Friends about the Abbey and its history.

When outings or talks are organised, tickets can be purchased on the website.

The address of the website is:

www.friendsoftewkesburyabbey.org.uk

or you can use this QR code:



You can email our Administrator at admin@friendsoftewkesburyabbey.org.uk or contact the Chair at chair@friendsoftewkesburyabbey.org.uk