Chairman's report

Given at the Annual General Meeting
5pm 2nd October 2024
At St Michael's Church

INTRODUCTION

There have been 8 Committee meetings since the last AGM, and I am going to start by giving a brief introduction to the Committee members and a quick summary of the work they have done for the Friends in the past year.

Firstly, Elisabeth Barratt is our Secretary – she organises our meetings, takes minutes and holds us accountable to our action points. It is Elisabeth who fulfils our obligations to report to the Charity Commission, and she has a niche expertise as our VAT guru. Elisabeth is the longest serving member of the Committee and her experience and long memory of the previous work of the Friends is of huge help.

Alison Heard was elected last AGM and became Treasurer in December. Alison is a qualified accountant and has been invaluable in managing the finances over the past year – particularly as it comes with the huge responsibility for the proper oversight of the National Lottery Heritage Fund Grant for the Tower Stories. In the past 12 months, thanks to the Lottery Grant, a lot more money has been channelled through our charity than former years and Alison who has worked closely with Elaine and the Committee as we have spent the grant monies on the Tower Stories, and our other funds in furtherance of our objects.

Simon Edkins was co-opted by the Committee in October last year to be our Membership secretary. He has done a magnificent job of transforming our membership database into a digitised, GDPR-compliant, updated tool which means we can keep in touch with our membership via email and the website, and members can keep in touch with us at the click of a button. He has also been instrumental in recruiting more members at various events during the past year.

The other members of the Committee are: Mary Wilson (co-opted last October), and Dr Bill Price, Maggie Durkee, David Bett, Fiona Jukes, and the Church Wardens Kit Stallard and Richard Wilson. They have all been involved variously in organising events, pouring drinks, producing cakes and plants, opening their gardens and supporting the work of the Friends with their knowledge, enthusiasm, ideas and time. Their names will crop up through this report when I talk about individual events, and the Tower Stories project. I, personally, am very grateful to them all for their indefatigable support, and I am sure the rest of the members will echo with their thanks to them today.

As a last word on the Committee, Fiona Jukes and Mary Wilson are not standing for re-election this September owing to other commitments – I know the whole Committee will wish me to thank them particularly for all their help and involvement with the Friends.

Membership

We have over the year completed our transition over to contacting our Members by email ; which has already started saving time, paper and postage costs, which are now quite considerable.
The privacy policy has been put in place and GDPR is complied with. There is a new logo to help the Friends establish a distinct identity separate from the Church and the Tower Stories.

Excitingly, this year we have developed a website for the Friends. Please take a look www.friendsofstmichaels.org) – this year we will start to really explore its potential to communicate our news and information, reach members of the public and of course, keep in touch with our members. It is professionally put together, is easy to navigate. Additionally, new and renewing Members will be able to pay membership subscriptions via the website – and supporters can make donations with an easy click or two! The paper application forms have been updated and are of course available in the Church and at events.

Huge thanks to Simon and to David and all those who have contributed so far to getting this all up and running. It looks fabulous!

Our current membership stands at 115. That includes 110 Life members, 12 Annual Members and 33 Honorary members. This latter is a category that was created when The Friends amended the Constitution and is a way in which the Committee in exceptional circumstances can thank particular donors (who were otherwise not formal Members) for their contributions in time or money during the year, and deepen the engagement with people who have shown an interest in our charity.

After careful deliberation the Committee have resolved to increase the membership fees to £10 for Annual membership and £75 for Life membership. Those new charges will be effective from today. The fees had remained the same for some years, and we felt that the time was right to make the changes.

Sadly, David Longbourne, who for many years had so beautifully inscribed the names in the Life Members Book, died early this year. We are very grateful to Gill Grout who has taken over this job and updates the list from time to time.

Fundraising activities
Onto our fundraising activities during the last year.

The Friends hosted two concerts in the last year - the popular Carmen Co musical production and last Sunday's successful jazz concert – thank you to Maggie and Bill for organising these. We also ran tea rooms, plant stalls, served drinks and received donations at various events including last year's Literary Festival, and the NGS Open Garden event at

The Chantry (this latter weekend made £700 over two days). Our participation in the Mere Open Garden weekend in June resulted in the donation of £1000 out of monies raised in conjunction with the Mere Gardening Club. In addition, by popular demand, donation buckets were passed around at the Proms Concert in July earlier this summer.

Please note, that the money from those events which came in after 30th June 2024 will show in next year's accounts.

Maggie Durkee has been running the pre-loved book stall in the Friends Corner of the Church. That has brought in a steady trickle of funds amounting to just over £321 and there have been two successful social events open to all. Look at the website for details of the next book club coffee morning! Thank you, Maggie for having the idea and for running this.

The Tower Stories

The Tower Stories is a project being run by the Friends of St Michaels' and as you will remember, is approximately 95% funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, and 5% by the Friends from donations. You have heard from Alison how the invoices and payments work. We were not given the money as a lump sum of £249,00 odd, but are paid back by the NHLF as the costs are incurred as per the agreed budgets. VAT is claimed back as well.

The Grant enabled us to recruit an administrator, and in October last year we advertised nationally, and after a full shortlist and interview process and with the oversight of the National Lottery appointed Elaine Stallard to the position.

The first part of the project swung into action, and with the architect Brian Watts as Project Manager the restoration of the Pinnacles and associated refurbishment work began.

In January the scaffolding went up. The stone-work on all four pinnacles was restored, corroded ironwork was removed, the lightning rods were improved, New stone crosses were cut, the Pennants and the clock face were gilded, and the initials of the current Church wardens was inscribed on two of the pennants (as is the tradition). Internally, the staircase was made safer for visitors to the Tower, and new heat-retaining curtains will improve the warmth in the Church. Everything was accomplished and completed within budget and on time. The scaffolding came down in May, and, subject to the usual sign-offs, this part of the project is achieved. The whole project was recorded by our photographer in residence Steve Hawkins and a time-lapse camera, and the images will form part of the lasting legacy of the Tower Stories and give a flavour of how many skills have been employed in the restoration. Do have a look at The Tower Stories website (www.thetowerstories.co.uk) which is now up and running where you can see some photographs of the restoration work. As the year goes on, more will be added to the information on the site and will provide a lasting record of the Tower Stories and a resource for the future.

A launch party and a public meeting were held to inform the people of Mere about what we were doing, and how things were progressing, and the First Tower Stories event took place in June when a free Proms Concert was held in the Churchyard. Starring the Shrewton Silver

Band this was a chance for everyone to celebrate the restoration and attracted a large number of people from across Mere, young and old!

Meanwhile, the rest of the Tower Stories project gathered pace. You will remember from previous talks that a significant part of the grant was for a community-led project to run activities in Mere relating to the heritage of the Tower of St Michael's Church.

Elaine Stallard has been leading this, with the support of a Steering Group of local people and reporting to the Committee of the Friends. This steering group meets regularly to create ideas and forge links across the community to create a programme of events and activities which will bring the Tower Stories to life. I would like to thank Bill Price, Maggie Durkee, Simon Edkins, Rachel Hansford, Helen Watts and Anne Rich for their involvement.

A group of local historians has collated research from original sources which will provide material which will provide the content for the stories and my thanks go to Kate Symonds, Rose Heesom, Fiona Davies, Jean Booth and Martyn Beardsley for sharing their expertise so generously.
The following groups have been working with the Steering Group; Mere Primary School, Seeds4Success, Shreen Harmony, Mere Museum, Mere WI, Mere Quilters, Mere Art Group, Little Angels, The Pennybank writers and MADS. We have also had the support through the year of Mere Matters, the Town Council, George Jeans, and Andrew Murrison MP. Next year will be a huge opportunity to promote and strengthen these new links across the community, and if you know of any groups or individuals who would like to be involved with either the Friends, or the Tower Stories please do encourage them to get in touch.

In the Spring we advertised nationally for a Composer in Residence and a Writer in Residence and were thrilled with the response and level of interest from some extremely high-quality candidates. The recruitment process was very thorough, and after short-list interviews the recruitment Committee appointed author Jane Borrodale and composer Richard Nye to the Tower Stories project.

Their job is essentially each to come up with a piece of work that brings to life the heritage of the Tower and Jane and Richard are very much free to choose how they respond to the building itself, the stories it holds and the people of Mere. The result will be tangible works that are licensed to the Friends for use in the future. I thank everyone who met with Richard and Jane to share their knowledge about life in Mere, past and present. Together with the history-based research, and the Tower building itself, there will a great deal of material for Jane and Richard to draw upon.

As I mentioned, a programme of events is currently being prepared, and every household in Mere will have a leaflet through the letterbox in November outlining the fun and the opportunities in the year to come. Details will also be on the websites. Please put the 20th/ 21st/22nd June 2025 in your diaries for a three-day event marking the end of the Tower

Stories and performances forming the culmination of Jane and Richard's work, a Medieval-themed festival, a pop concert and a Service of thanksgiving here in St Michael's Church.

We are confident that the Tower Stories will continue to bring joy to the people of Mere which will last in the memory, and reconnect us all, particularly the youngest in the community with the heritage (*their* heritage) of the Tower of this remarkable Church. I hope to be able to stand here this time next year, at the 2025 AGM, to report to you how transformative the project has been for the people of Mere generally, and also the Friends of St Michael, and to outline what we intend to do with the legacy of The Tower Stories.

Thank you very much.

Felicity Wilson
2nd October 2024