CHAIRMAN's report 2025

It has been an extremely busy year since the last AGM. The Committee have continued some of our normal work of fundraising, and modernising the work of the Friends as we entered the second year of the mighty Tower Stories project. I will come to the Tower Stories in a minute, but before that I would like to pay tribute to all those who have helped run the Friends in the last Year.

Firstly, Elisabeth Barratt our Secretary – she does all the minutes, manages the meetings and does the reporting to the Charity Commission. A charity cannot function properly without someone efficient, diligent and organised and Elisabeth, we are very grateful for all the work that you do!

Alison Heard, our Treasurer has been an absolute rock this year. Her cool appraising and professional eye and keen questions have kept the Committee on track. Managing other people's money is a huge responsibility, and that has been particularly so when that includes a quarter of a million pounds of National Heritage Lottery Funding. The Lottery impose a complicated system of reimbursement of each tranche of money after the event and this required very careful management from month to month. I know that Elaine, the administrator of the Tower Stories has found Alison's expertise and professionalism indispensable. Alison – a massive 'thank you' from all of us!

Simon Edkins, our Membership Secretary has continued to welcome new members to modernise our communications and to the develop our website. Simon has a forensic approach to analysing data, and his strong common-sense is very much appreciated. Earlier this year saw the launch of our new membership application form, which is colourful and informative and is available to visitors at events and at the back of the church. Thank you for the significant amount of time you have spent on getting everything into shape, Simon!

Bill Price

In the last year Bill has developed his role on the events side of the Friends' work. Having been instrumental in the Pinnacles Appeal from the start, Bill was at the heart of developing the Tower Stories project as part of Elaine's steering group. He and Renata always volunteer to run stalls or to marshal where required, and Bill has also taken on the role of events co-ordinator for the Friends and is currently finalising the programme of events for the coming year. We owe him a good deal for all his work on this, so a big 'thank you' goes to him today!

Maggie Durkee

Maggie and Mike are on a well-deserved holiday at the moment, but I know that you will all be aware of Maggie's indefatigable work for the Friends as you will have come across her at so many moments during the year. Maggie has continued to organise the Book Stall in the Friends Corner this year; she was instrumental in bringing The Year Clock production to the Church, has liaised with the Town Council and the Bell ringers on our behalf, and been instrumental in the organisation of every event throughout the year. Maggie has also qualified as a Tower Guide. Her energy, and willingness to get 'stuck in' and volunteer for everything and to chat to anyone on the way in is hugely appreciated.

Lastly, and by no means least, David Bett, who is continuing as a friend but not as a Committee member. David has made an enormous contribution to the work of the Committee in his time as a trustee over the last few years. His expertise in historic buildings and his interest in St Michael's and its history were invaluable in the various restoration and development projects we have done, including the Pinnacles. He always stepped up to the plate when a barman was required, and was always the first to offer to make his signature lemon drizzle cake when we held a cake stall. His last contribution to the work of the committee was a very thoughtful

series of suggestions for our strategic review and the final document we agreed was very much influenced by his insights. David, thank you so much for your time on the Committee.

Finally, alongside the Churchwardens, we were so pleased to welcome the vicar, Michael Molano to The Friends in November last year. Michael, Kit Stallard and Richard Wilson three are the "ex officio' members of our Committee. Their presence on the Committee enables us to focus on how we spend the money raised by the Friends, and work together with the PCC to fulfil the purposes set out in our constitution.

Membership and Website

The development of the website was done in tandem with the Tower Stories Website and the two websites will eventually merge. This was paid for by the National Heritage Lottery Fund, as was the membership leaflet. One of the aims of the Lottery funding was to make The Friends, as a community group within Mere, stronger for the future, and this is a good illustration of how this is achieved. New members can sign up and pay for membership via the website, and the membership secretary has a designated email address and can be contacted directly through the website. We are also now using the free Mailchimp service to send emails to all members, which is significantly time-saving, and tickets for future events will be able to be purchased from the website directly. We are, however, of course, going to continue to sell paper tickets locally and at the door at event.s

Fundraising and Donations

We were extremely grateful to receive generous donations raised at the funerals of Christopher Stevenson and Peter Platt-Higgins at St Michael's.

I would like to add that Christopher was Chairman of the Friends for some years and was a member of the congregation here. I thought that we should remember him today and acknowledge his support, and leadership of the Friends over the years, both during his lifetime and in his memory after he died.

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There were two Friends events last year– a Jazz concert and The Year Clock (a performance about William Barnes). We also received revenue from the tea stall held at the Chantry Garden NGS Open garden, donations raised at the Festival of 9 Lessons and Carols, and of course every month from the bookstall.

Governance

In February the Committee spent some time conducting a Strategic Review, and came up with the Strategy Plan. It is aimed to set out achievable aims for the next three years. (Copies in Church and soon to be up on the Website).

Next steps include reviewing our financial controls, continuing to review our compliance generally, and the adoption of a Safeguarding Policy and the training of all members of the Committee. We also are looking to improve our offering to Members and to recruit new members.

The Tower Stories

You will recall that by the AGM last year we had completed the restoration of the Tower, the clock and the Pinnacles, and had recruited a composer in residence, a writer in residence. This year has seen the fulfilment of the Community side of the Tower Stories Project. You will remember that the National Heritage Lottery Fund gave us 95% of the costs of this, with the Friends finding the remaining 5%.

Our photographer in residence, Stephen Hawking had been documenting the restoration and continued to produce a photographic record of the community events that took place in the second year of the project. He held a photographic exhibition in the Church and his images are shown on the Tower Stories Website. Separately, a video documenting the restoration of the Tower was created and is also posted on both the Tower Stories and Friends' websites.

Jane Borodale wrote a beautiful prose poem, "*Springline*", which invokes the spirit of Mere, past and Present. It was given out free to residents at the Medieval weekend, although many people generously made a donation to support the Friends as a thank you for their copy. Jane also conducted writing workshops for the Primary school, the Pennybank writers and a more general group.

Richard Nye, our composer in residence created both the words and music for *'Windelstan*", the lovely Anthem for Mere. He composed different versions of it – for the whole primary school; and instrumental version for the website, and for a combined choir of adults and school-children in a very memorable and moving performance at the Medieval weekend.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those people in Mere who took part in these projects – whether by sharing their stories with Jane and Richard, taking part in workshops, participating in the choirs or helping to organise events. I should also mention the wonderful Megan who is the music teacher at the Primary school, and who worked with Richard Nye and the children for a whole term to produce a truly enriching experience, both for them and also for us.
Some of the rest of the highlights of the Tower Stories Community programme included;

The Star of Bethlehem installation by Bruce Munro and the lighting up of the Church exterior in December last year saw approximately 2000 visitors to St Michaels.

There were talks on the peregrine Falcon, the craftsmen of the restoration and life in Medieval Mere. Penny Fraser and her team led an extremely popular Paddington Bear party for under 5s and their parents.

Twelve volunteer Tower Guides were trained, and Tower Tours were conducted. More will be held in the future, and having been on one myself, I cannot recommend it highly enough!

Lastly, but by no means least, we held a three day extravaganza in June. On the first day, the school children came down to the Church and there was a special performance of readings inspired by Springline, and a brilliant rendition of Windelstan (complete with samples of the actual bells from the tower) by the children. On the Saturday, as I am sure you will all remember, we held a Medieval Fair and pop concert. The atmosphere throughout the day was absolutely fabulous, local businesses were involved, and the feedback was entirely positive. As a fitting finale, a service of thanksgiving, led by the Vicar and Bishop Andrew, took place in St Michaels.

Awareness of the Friends of St Michael has been increased as a result of the whole project, and we sincerely mean to learn from the experience of the Tower Stories. We will be inviting all those we have worked with throughout the Tower Stories to a workshop. We want to hear about their experience, get their feedback and continue to build strengthen the web of friendships already formed. There is no point in us as an organisation being stuck at the end of Church Street; the Tower Stories has given us a tremendous opportunity to put the church at the heart of this community. Now is that moment to keep the enthusiasm and all we have learnt going forward.

The formal part of the project has come to an end. Our relationship with the National Heritage Lottery Fund, thanks to Elaine's professionalism, leadership, vision and efficiency was and continues to be very positive and the Friends are carrying on working with the Lottery to ensure a tangible and strong legacy. Watch this space!

The Year Ahead

Events
Phoenix Café orchestra – Free Concert of music from the 20s and 30s 3pm this Sunday October 5th!

Tea and cakes will be available, with a retiring collection in aid of the musicians and donations in aid of the Friends.

Preparations are well underway, but Bill has asked me to remind everyone here that home-made cakes would be very welcome! If you would like to do this, please could you let me or Elisabeth know tonight, and we pass it on to Bill.

Early Notice
On Thursday 6th November there will be a concert of Folk Music written and performed by Andrew Rumsey. It will be held in the Church at 7pm with early bird tickets at £10 each. You may recognise the name – Andrew is the Bishop of Ramsbury, has visited St Michaels twice recently; for The Tower Stories and to celebrate Michaelmas. He is a good friend of this Church, and has this intriguing side-line of music-making. We do hope that we'll see you there!

A variety of other future events are in the pipeline and dates are being firmed up. We will publish the full programme at the earliest

opportunity – and you, our Members will be the first to hear about it!

In the meantime, look out for these following events which relate to St Michael's:

The Table Top sale on 25th October 10am-12pm

Shreen Harmony's Christmas Concert on Saturday 20th December

And also (on a date to be confirmed) a very beautiful and traditional Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols with a guest choir.

Felicity Wilson
Chairman