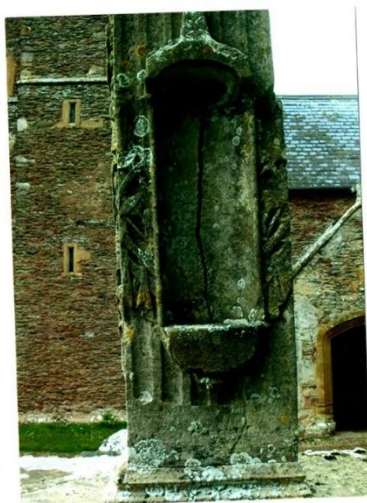


The Willis Monument: The Story of Its Restoration

A nine and a half year ‘headache’ for Goathurst PCC was finally relieved at the end of 2024, when the 18th century, Grade II* listed monument in the churchyard was, at last, restored!



It all began in April 2015, when a visitor to St. Edward's church (who was also a member of the St Andrew's Conservation Trust) noted the 'exceptional' monument in the churchyard and that the Corinthian column was in a 'precarious state'. Contact was made with the Archdeacon of Taunton about the need for its repair and how the Trust might help. In October 2015 Sally Strachey Historic Conservation (SSHC) was commissioned to prepare a report which highlighted a number of decay mechanisms that were undermining the monument's structural integrity and overall stability, rendering it in need of urgent attention.



There followed consultations involving the PCC, the Church Architect, conservators, and Historic England. It was then that the monument was upgraded to II* status as Historic England stated: 'Its sculptural quality as well as its design and execution provide it with a higher level of special interest within a national context, and, as such, it fully merits listing as Grade II*.' Other experts have referred to it as 'outstanding', 'exceptional', and Sir Mervyn Medlicott Bt says, 'The grandest chest tomb I have ever seen.'

The PCC began to wrestle with the problem of raising the considerable sum of money needed for its repair and grants were sought. The Fairfield Trust was the first to respond with £2,500 in 2016.



Meanwhile the condition of the column deteriorated further, necessitating the dismantling of the column and its safe storage until the monument could be fully restored. In January 2018 a Faculty was obtained and St Andrew's Conservation Trust granted £4,000 to cover the costs. SSHC carried out the dismantling and stored the pieces at their works until early 2020.

During 2018 a grant application was submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). The reply in August advised that whilst it met all the heritage criteria really well, it did not fulfil those for community engagement and, therefore, we were encouraged to address these requirements and to reapply.

Undeterred, we set about considering ways in which this might be achieved and were on the point of reapplying in 2019 when we received advice that we should not merely focus on the Willis monument but as part of a wider package to include the Halswell and Kemeys-Tynte memorials within the church. A setback, involving more preparatory work!

We met with Sally Strachey to discuss the way forward. She advised a full conservation report on these monuments to inform the grant bodies and told us that grants were available for such a report. Contact was made with John Webster at the Church Buildings Council (CBC) and a grant of £700 towards the cost (£1,100) was received.

We also contacted Edward Strachan at Halswell House, the Halswell Park Trust-HPT (Temple of Harmony) and the Landmark Trust (Robin Hood's Hut) to propose that we all join forces to create a Goathurst Village Heritage Trail as part of the Heritage Open Days' Festival in September 2019. The church would be the designated refreshment 'stop', with money raised from their sale being used to swell the restoration fund as well as fulfilling the community engagement aspect for HLF. Over 400 visitors were hosted over that weekend and about £700 accrued.

In December, the PCC allocated £400 of the refreshment money, together with the grant and commissioned the Conservation Report from SSHC, to be undertaken in February 2020.

Further setbacks in 2019 also impeded our progress:

Firstly, because the church bells were rendered dangerous and unusable due to a crack in the 5th bell. An appeal was launched in September and yet more grants sought in this respect.

Secondly, just a week before Christmas, thieves stole the lead from the north chapel roof resulting in serious water ingress into the chapel and affecting the Halswell-Kemeys-Tynte memorials!

The bells and the roof, pushed the Willis monument down the list of priorities and then Covid struck!

However, just prior to the pandemic, SSHC were able to complete the Conservation Report which also identified the damage caused by the water ingress, highlighting that one memorial was in urgent need of securing. It was not all gloom though, as the PCC received £3,220 from HPT (which was being disbanded following the sale of the Temple of Harmony) and together with insurance money for subsequential damage, this enabled two memorials in the chapel to be restored between lockdowns in the summer of 2020.

In December 2020 the PCC were advised that, due to moving premises, SSHC could no longer store the Willis column and an alternative home must be found. (Thankfully, in early 2021 Halswell House came to the rescue, offering secure storage for the Willis column until it could be restored.)

With the bells and roof projects having taken priority, being completed in 2021, and Covid restrictions being lessened, we were able to revive the Village Heritage Trail in 2021, back on the fundraising campaign for Willis. In addition, the PCC had embarked on the 'Spend A Penny Project' (SAPP) for a toilet and kitchenette facilities for the church. (It is difficult to host events and offer hospitality without these essentials!)

Fast forward to 2024 and the PCC engaged with the Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme (QLPS) regarding wilding and management of the churchyard as a community space. We were introduced to its heritage 'arm', and an offer of £5,000 towards the restoration of the Willis monument if we secured 3 quotes and the work could be completed by March 2025. The very same day, St Andrew's Conservation Trust emailed to enquire about any progress with Willis as they had budgeted for another grant towards its restoration, but would allocate the funds elsewhere if we were not in a position to proceed. This was a 'lightbulb' moment!

The Churchwarden swung into action, explaining the situation and that, together with the PCC's restricted Willis fund, we now had £10,000 in hand. They immediately replied that they could give us a further £5,000! Quotes were immediately sought and advice taken about which company to engage. SSHC were independently the preferred choice of all parties! QLPS recognised that there would still be a shortfall in funds available and offered to increase their grant to up to £10,000 to cover it! This was subsequently amended to a flat £10,000 with the proviso that any money left over can be transferred towards the restoration of the other memorials within the church.

SSHC began work in October 2024. During the restoration of the chest and column, the decision was made to reveal its wide slab base to restore the visual impact of the monument as it was originally intended. This delayed the final completion date until December whilst suitable reclaimed slabs were sourced.

This 18th century monument has also contributed to 21st century facilities as scrap metal and lead from within have been taken to reclamation to benefit the SAPP fund!

The total cost of the restoration project, which has been filmed by The Local Film Company, is £19,408.80 (of which we can reclaim £3,078.80 from the Memorials Grant Scheme).

Goathurst PCC is extremely grateful to the following for their support in facilitating this restoration:

Sharon and Richard Piron for enabling use of their cabin 'welfare' facilities which has enabled considerable savings on the cost.

Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme (funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund)

St Andrew's Conservation Trust, especially Dr Tim Connor

Fairfield Trust

Sally Strachey Historic Conservation

Annie Evans (architect)

Edward Strachan, Oksana, Ann and Emil, at Halswell

Mark Lidster (Diocesan Church Buildings' Advisor)

Dave Bunney

The Goathurst Art Group

Juliette Butler (Historic England, Heritage at Risk)

Antony at The Local Film Company

A special event to celebrate the restoration of this architecturally significant monument will be held in the spring of 2025.

Footnote: At the outset, as a member of the PCC nine years ago, I was not at all interested in the restoration of this monument and saw it as diverting us from more important issues, such as installing much needed toilet facilities!

However, having become a churchwarden and hearing our then new incumbent, Rev Eleanor King, being encouraged to 'maximise our assets' my attitude began to change, especially with the insistence of St Andrew's Conservation Trust that this monument was significant architecturally and worth saving. I began to appreciate both the significance and wealth of centuries of history and heritage that resides in St Edward's Church and our responsibility to preserve it for future generations.

Once we embarked on participation in the Heritage Open Days Annual Festival in 2019 and saw the tremendous response of visitors from far and wide, it dawned on me that, rather than seeing these monuments as 'millstones' they were in fact valuable assets and integral to our mission and outreach to the wider community. So many groups ask to visit the church to view this heritage making the need for adequate welfare facilities even greater.

As I reflect now, it seems incredible that the project was finally achieved within ten months! I have become increasingly aware of God's timing and 'hand' in the restoration of the Willis monument and how important it is for us to respond to opportunities positively when they arise, rather than be daunted! Nothing is too hard or impossible if it is in keeping with God's will and for His glory. Suddenly, 'doors' open, people are willing to help, and everything falls into place-it does seem like a minor miracle and the PCC can now heave a sigh of relief that it is no longer a burden, but an important part of our mission and outreach!

Brenda Smith, Churchwarden, December 2024