

Rave in the Nave

Paul Hamilton reports on strange goings on in the countryside

On St Francis's day 2006 I was inducted as Rector of Ingrave to serve two churches of differing traditions who were forced together against their will into one benefice. Consequently their relationship was colourful and less than perfect. The added bonus in my benefice was All Saints, East Horndon, a beautiful Tudor, redundant church on the top of a hill adjacent to the A127 and visible for miles around. Its redundancy began in the early 1970s and ownership was transferred to wonderful Churches Conservation Trust, administered by equally wonderful and dedicated volunteers in an open church yard for which Ingrave parish retained responsibility. On New Year's Eve 2020 the police called and told me All Saints had been broken into and 300 people were packed in having a 'rave' without Covid protection. They asked me not to attend until the morning as the scene was not yet safe. Nothing could have prepared me for what followed: two weeks of phenomenal community responses and media attention on a daily basis. Despite being a Tudor church, archaeological excavations tell us there was another church building preceding it, meaning the site has been a place of worship for over 700 years. All Saints is a glorious example of Tudor architecture attracting visitors and enquiries from all over the world.

Many notable people have been laid to rest in the church including Sir John Tyrrell, former speaker to the House of Commons and his wife, Lady Alice Tyrrell, members of the Baden Powell family and according to legend the heart of Queen Elizabeth I. However, the most important thing for us is the open church for burials to residents of the parish and tended by their loved ones. Giving children a sense of history on their visits from local schools is one of my personal highlights. I am fond of showing them the chisel marks on the cut stone of the door frame and watching their faces as they make connections between those who work hard to provide for their needs today and the men who made the chisel marks 500 years earlier on the very stones in front of them to earn money to provide for their children.

When I began my time as Rector of Ingrave, All Saints was in the care of volunteers who had taken it upon themselves to protect it following its redundancy 43 years earlier. They did



a wonderful job of preserving, maintaining and hosting occasional concerts. As time progressed their sense of well-intentioned protection grew stronger but morphed into metaphorical barbed wire that kept those who needed the church most, in a cruel, materialistic and competitive society, from entering. After prayerfully forming some priorities in my first year as Parish Priest, making All Saints a little more accessible to working class people like myself was a clear and much needed priority.

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Unfortunately, my intervention did not go down well with the remnant of ageing volunteers and to be fair I probably came on a bit strong and undervalued their decades of work. Now I am older and a little wiser, I can see the connection between a person's panic as they age and become unable to do all they once did and its parallel compensation as they fiercely protect the few things that remain in their control from changing. I would argue priests need to know enough psychology to know how little we know and understanding the reasons for intransigence is the first step in helping people heal from it in a context of pastoral care. A campaign ensued against me and letters were passed around that some thought I should take legal action against. However, these were good and well intentioned people, who were also motivated by love for the church as they lashed out at the optimistic, cheeky young man who appeared to endanger something they loved without valuing their contribution.

While attending their AGM (much to their surprise) and discussing this with them face-to-face, the Churches Conservation Trust accepted their resignation and the Friends of All Saints was born. A small group of fresh volunteers aiming to make this beautiful place of prayer and worship accessible to more people than a select few. The next 13 years saw hundreds





of visitors, concerts, plays from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to *A Christmas Carol* and an increased sense of ownership and love for the church from the surrounding community. All was going well. But optimism carries risk. Open doors make us vulnerable. As an optimist, I do not ever want to be prevented from doing the right thing because some may respond by doing the wrong thing but optimists need realists around us to remind us when we need to baton down the hatches from the storm outside. Nevertheless, I do not regret these changes as ours is an incarnational faith in which Our Lord got his feet dirty walking among the issues of the day. We try to walk the same path and in our own modest ways occasionally suffer with him. What we found on New Year's Day was painful. Thanks to the keen eye of a concerned neighbour walking her dog in the isolated area in which All Saints sits, police officers were able to remove the ravers shortly after 10pm on New Year's Eve and prevent them from seeing in the New Year. One

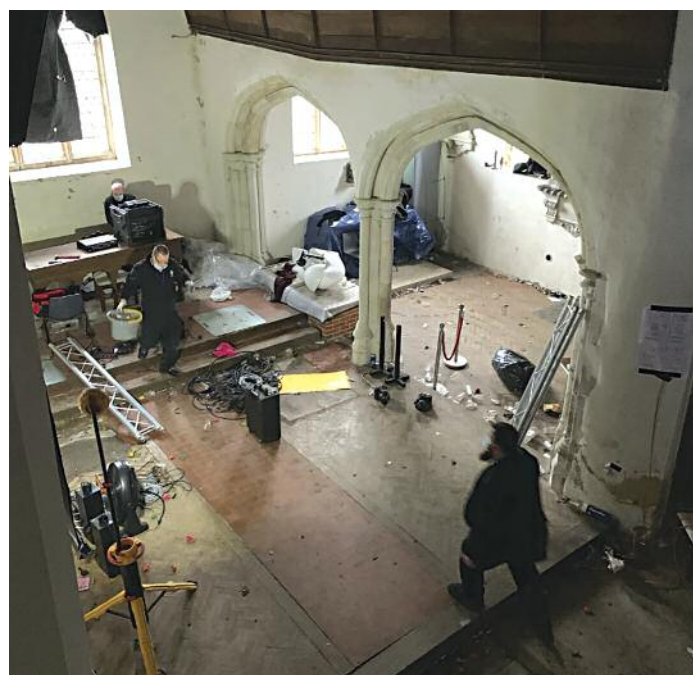
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of them filmed the police trying to enter while throwing bottles at them, posted it on their social media where it was digitally seized by the police for evidence and was one of the many clips used by the local and national news. The aftermath was awful. Mercifully only one window was damaged, but there was a sense of desecration felt by all of us as we cleared up drugs paraphernalia from graves and the police took all the DJ equipment away. The entire church was covered in empty bottles, drug paraphernalia, half drunken glasses of alcohol, streamers, balloons, and an unbearable smell of drugs. One priest observed how the rave itself was amusingly orthodox.

The DJ had set up the equipment on the altar (but pulled it away from the wall to be west facing), blessed the crowd with the music from that vantage point while people danced in the nave. Mercifully he stopped short of suggesting 'Fresh Expressions' or worse, 'Rave in the Nave', but it was an amusing observation on an otherwise depressing morning.

One of our local reporters asked if he could enter, take a few pictures and get a few quotes. We happily obliged and when it was clear that community interest could be significant, we set about using our social media skills, adjusted our websites and in the light of so much suffering at the current time felt nervous in asking for £2,000 to assist with the clean-up. At the time of writing our fund is at £22,204. Most of the donations are small and 90% of them are local. One donation of £4 came with the following message, "I'm a single mother who has lost her job during the pandemic. I wish I could give more but I hope this makes a contribution." I do not think I have ever seen a more moving example of a widow's mite given from poverty. I debated whether to close the fund to prevent more donations. There are so many good causes in Essex and so much need but concluded that this expression of love people have for God's church, and their desire to join in with the gospel impetus of bringing light into darkness, is not something I have the right to restrict or reject. The following two weeks were filled with interviews from local, national and international media. Not only did the community outrage catch the media's attention, they seemed fascinated and delighted that in these so called secular days, people's outrage would turn into something so positive and their response would be so generous.

One local radio feature seemed delighted that we had to postpone the clean-up day as the number of volunteers sweeping with brooms, would have exceeded the 300 ravers dancing in the nave on New Year's Eve. Following the first interview I was quickly reminded of how careful we need to be with the media and recalled my modest media training from my time at college in the 1990s. All the interviewers I spoke to seemed to be genuine people seeking to share truth with their viewers but directors and editors can be a different story, hungry for ratings and always looking for an angle to make their story



more noticeable (apart from *New Directions* of course). Two things disappointed me. Firstly, how my allusions to Epiphany and darkness being overcome by the light of the community response were cut from every interview. Secondly, an occasional interviewer would try and tempt me to show anger towards those who broke in. One even researched my love of martial arts and asked me what sort of manoeuvres I'd like to perform on the ravers. My recollection is I reflected it back with how unwilling the community would be to let me do that and sour their positive response but it was probably clumsier than I am recalling. However, the media is here to stay and all clergy need to be competent in making the most of the opportunity to serve our shared mission when the media come knocking on the Vicarage door. There is a tactic I developed which helps ensure the minimum of our message on the editing room floor. Think of everything you want the viewer/hearer to see/hear and turn it into a mind map, spider gram or diagram then let the interviewer take the lead. If we go in with a sermon, most of it will be cut.



Norman Banks has agreed to be celebrant and we look forward to inviting you all then or at any other time. **ND**

Fr Paul Hamilton is the Rector of Ingrave

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The interviewer will have a pre-rehearsed set of questions along with a few curve balls which we simply match to the part of the non-linear, mind map or diagram of points we have planned in advance. This usually means most of our words are retained and the interviewer feels they got a reasonable answer to every question they asked. For my parishes this has been a refreshingly good news story in the middle of some dark times. We are two ordinary parishes who are ministering among much suffering, have lost key members to Covid, are struggling with numbers, finance, fabric and relationships with a wider Diocese that seems to be increasingly talking a different language to us. If I am honest, I have found many good news stories over the years difficult to read as I confess to an envy for something extraordinary to happen here too. This took us completely by surprise. Although the good news may be modest in real terms, its sacramental significance has not been lost on the community who feel its hope and are daring to believe once again that God is not finished with his church and maybe has a place for them too. We extend the Christian hand of friendship and forgiveness to all those who did this to our church. If I ever meet any of them I will forgive them, shake their hand (or touch elbows) and say, "ah well you did a daft thing. I've not been an angel in my time either. Let's move on."

However, what thrills my heart the most, is that during a dark time for all of us, among a tremendous amount of suffering and worry, the community was not going to allow a silly

mistake to desecrate the one source of hope and truth we all have amidst a pandemic showing us the fragility of human life and the foolishness of putting all our hope in this world. Truth is a stubborn beast; it never goes away. This has been the most unexpected and fascinating example I have seen of a community refusing to allow a temple of truth its never attends from being misused and demoted into a secular and insignificant venue devoid of meaning. Its generous response means that All Saints, East Horndon will become more accessible to the community, safer from misuse and increased in its effectiveness in our shared mission of making Christ known. At the time of writing, we are planning a rededication exhibition day/festival for September, God and Covid willing. Bishop

A message from Terry Waite CBE

I was deeply upset to hear of the damage caused to my friend Fr Paul's church by a group of people holding an illegal rave party.

Apart from religious services, All Saints is also used as a vibrant centre for community activities and unless repairs can be speedily carried out the whole community will suffer.

It is a sad reflection on British society that there are people who act without regard for other people or for property. Can you please show that you care by making a donation, however small, to put All Saints back on its feet again.

Vandalism is a dreadful thing to happen at any time but to begin the New Year in such a way is disheartening.

Let us not be defeated by this mindless behaviour. Together we can make sure that All Saints can soon be back ready to serve the community of East Horndon.

Let us make 2021 a Happy New Year for us all.

Terry Waite CBE

