

## Friends of Ash Church

*Friends of Ash Church* has been established to provide an opportunity for anyone to help us to preserve the oldest and most interesting building in the parish. You don't have to be a member of the church or even attend it regularly. All that matters is that you have an interest in our local history and want to help to preserve it for future generations to enjoy.

The church urgently needs funds to repair the crumbling tower and to ensure that the bells will continue to ring out across the parish. The building also needs modern facilities so that it can continue to fulfil a useful function in the twenty-first century and avoid falling into disrepair through lack of use.

Why are we making a big push now? Well, several things have come together that mean it makes sense to embark on a major repair, refurbishment and improvement programme. It has three projects, separate but, to some extent, interdependent:

**The Tower.** Some may say that the tower is an expensive irrelevance in a modern church. In one sense, it is. It is no longer necessary to use the bells to call people to worship because everyone has clocks and watches. We no longer need to keep a lookout for marauding outlaws and to be able to lock ourselves in the building and defend ourselves. But the tower is an integral part of the building. If it is allowed to collapse, the whole church becomes unusable. The church is a Grade I listed building so there is a duty to maintain it and just demolishing the tower is not an option, either financially or practically. The tower is already beginning to fall to pieces, so we have to do something and the cost of doing the repair work is estimated at around £63,000. And then, of course, the tower contains the bells.

**The Bells.** Our bellringers have explained in their section of this website why it is important to retain the bells in a usable condition and what this involves. Suffice to say that the bells are a tradition of English parish churches that is valued by many and our own peal will not last much longer without major works. The cost of this is estimated at £36,000.

**The Church Room.** We want to put our historic building into first-rate condition. We also want to keep it like that. The problem we face in this is essentially the building itself – it is a historic building, it has served the community for over 700 years. Every century or so there has, however, been a significant upgrading of the fabric or fittings of the building. The last occasion was about a hundred years ago when most of the interior furnishings were modernised. We have now come to the point where, if the building is to continue to serve a useful purpose, it has to be brought up to modern-day standards. It needs toilets, it needs a kitchen and it needs a small meeting room, separate from the main sanctuary where smaller groups, like the *Friends*, can meet in comfort. In a listed building we are very restricted in what we can do inside the existing structure, so the alternative is to create a new space, separate from but attached to the old building, that can provide these facilities. Only by doing this can we hope to secure the long-term future of the church building by widening its potential uses for many community purposes. The investment of some £200,000 now will mean that the church will continue to be an asset for the parish for, hopefully, centuries to come.

It makes practical sense to do most of this work at the same time so that we can maximise the use of, for example, scaffolding and professional expertise and we do not have three times the disruption or the additional expense of providing access for one project when the others are complete.

Another question we are often asked is why the church needs to ask for money. Contrary to what many people think, the national church is not wealthy. It is rich in assets, it owns prime estate across the country. But it cannot dispose of that because most is needed, and often it is protected by law. On a local level, the parish church of Ash and New Ash Green is paid for entirely by the people who go there to worship week by week. We receive no money from outside. In fact we pay into the central organisation of the Church for the services it provides for us. A significant proportion of our income is raised each year at Ash Fete – without that we could not afford to pay for a full-time rector and put aside a modest amount each year for day-to-day maintenance. From various appeals, and sales of assets in the past we now have a fair amount of money in the bank which is earmarked for these projects but at this point we need to look elsewhere for the remainder. We are applying to a wide variety of bodies for grants and hopefully will succeed with some of them. Many, however, ask that the church raises a proportion of the money itself. That is where the *Friends* come in. We know that there are many people who value the church building and want to see it thriving, even if they do not attend its services regularly. So we believe that they will be able to put in some effort now to help us to achieve that. The church members are able to take care of the routine upkeep, but the extra work needs a concerted effort by the whole community if the church is to survive as a going concern. So while we concentrate on the practical running of the church and manage the programme of repairs and new building we hope to rely on a wider group to help to raise the remaining finance.

Look through the information on this website and follow some of the links to discover more about the church and its bells. It really is worth preserving. Then do something practical to help.

The first AGM of the *Friends of Ash Church* is on Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> March 2008 at 8:00pm in Ash Church. This will include a talk by John Newman on the history and significance of Ash Church. More information is available from the Churchwarden, Jacky Richardson (01474 873733), or keep looking at this website and its Dates for your Diary.