



St Helen's Church
Ashby-de-la-Zouch

Heritage Project eNews

No. 22 February 2026



What's happening ...

Visit to Nottingham University Manuscripts and Special Collections

Ashby Parish Library: a special experience

The Manuscripts and Special Collections Department at Nottingham University holds the books of the Ashby Parish Library collection, aka The Bate Library. There are over 680 books in the collection, dating from the late 15th century onwards. The collection is owned by St Helen's but was put into the care of Nottingham University some years ago.

The Heritage Group was invited to send some volunteers to help catalogue the books. This is part of a project to investigate how other owners of Parish Libraries (there are 17 known to the University, which holds 5, including ours and that of Coleorton) might make use of the books. We were to look through the books for scribbles, scrawlings and graffiti.

So in mid February, 9 volunteers went to the Manuscripts Department for two days. The first morning was spent learning about how the books are being cared for and stored, and how to handle these very fragile books. We wore gloves – not cotton ones but latex gloves as these do not let sweat and oil onto the paper. The books have to be carefully lined up on foam wedges, again not what we expected – many TV programmes show books resting on cushions, but these do not protect the spines.

We learnt that a catalogue of the books had been found, compiled by a Coalville librarian in the 1950s. This is the basis of the computerised catalogue used today. Our job was to look for any writing and enter it onto the catalogue.

What we found was fascinating. In some cases, close hand-written notes in the margin referred to the printed book, suggesting that the reader was putting down their thoughts or planning a lecture. Thomas Bate wrote in Latin, taxing all of us, even those with some knowledge of the language. Other ancient owners had simply used the blank paper at the front or back of the book to write on. One, Thomas Cooke, had drawn a representation of Copernicus' solar system together with a list of distances to the planets and the *ursa major* constellation. This was about 1750.

Handwriting was tiny and in ink; reading pages of this was very difficult, and transcribing it into a column on a spreadsheet impossible, so we had to decide what it was about and write a summary. In some cases there were factual errors by early writers, which led us to carry out further research.

Items were found within the books: a letter overwritten with notes; a copy of the letter from the Earl of Huntingdon, intro-



Graffiti: Copernicus' solar system, distances & names

ducing Arthur Hildersham to be vicar of St Helens (we will get a facsimile of this); and best of all, a pressed flower, a pansy which still had indications of its colour.

Some of the books were well known: Fox's *Acts and Monuments*, Bishop Jewel's *Sermons* which all churches owned. Many were owned by Thomas Bate, others by his father also Thomas Bate whose monument is on the south wall of the church. Many books were owned by other vicars of St Helen's, and often had more than one owner. We were able to recognize signatures of some owners.

By the end of the two days we had looked through the books brought out of the store for us; these were ones known to have some writing. There are hundreds more books, but they will have to wait. We were all pretty exhausted, but had learnt so much.

There will be an exhibition at the University in October, which will be open to the public. We will advertise the date nearer the time – it will probably feature photos of us working!

Anne & Julie

Heritage Talks Series 2025-26

We still have one more talk to look forward to this season - not so much a talk as a film fest.

Wendy Freer, of Pudding Bag Productions, will be bringing three period dramas telling fascinating local stories from the 17th Century, plus a 21st Century 'short' about a Womens' Institute cake baking competition.

Talks are at 7.30 pm in the Heritage Centre. They cost £4 (cash or card), including light refreshments.

St Helen's Community Heritage Centre
4 Church Yard, Ashby-de-la-Zouch, LE65 1AA

HERITAGE TALKS 2025 - 26
Pudding Bag Productions Showcase
- three period dramas telling fascinating local stories from the 17th Century (plus an hilarious bonus short)

Wendy Freer
Tuesday 24th March
at 7.30pm

Tickets on the door - £4 including light refreshments

Facebook: St Helen's Ashby de la Zouch
Website: www.sthelensashby.net
Email: heritage@sthelensashby.net

heritage lottery fund
LOTTERY FUNDED

Research

Much recent research has centred on former vicars of St Helen's. There are brief histories of most of our vicars through the centuries on the history pages of our church website. If you'd like to learn more, please follow this link:

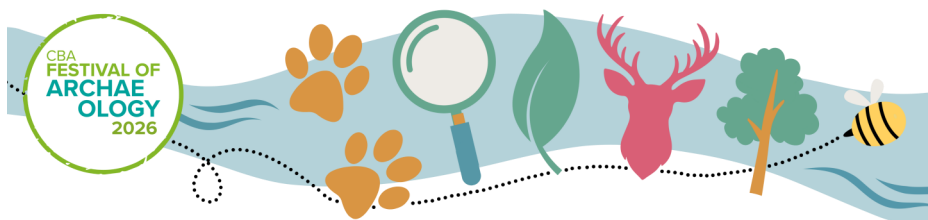
https://sthelens.churchinsight.com/Groups/362493/Our_Clergy.aspx

Research on our churchyard is also ongoing. At the end of February, I gave a talk developed from our popular churchyard tours, with additional research by myself and others. Our small group of active researchers are still busy delving into the archives, finding out more about the lives of people who rest at St Helen's. We look forward to sharing more of our findings in due course.

Julie Starkey

Festival of Archaeology 2026

This year's Leicestershire & Rutland Festival of Archaeology runs from Saturday July 4th to Sunday August 2nd. The national theme this year is archaeology and nature.



Our events at St Helen's this year will include:

Wednesday 8th July - 2 pm - a tour of St Helen's Church

Saturday 11th July - 2 pm - a 'hidden places' tour. This tour is new for this year and will take visitors into areas not generally accessible.

Saturday 18th July - 2 pm - a churchyard tour - updated for 2026

Monday 20th July - a children's workshop.

More details to follow. Keep an eye on our 'what's on' pages for Festival events at St Helen's: <https://sthelens.churchinsight.com/Group/Group.aspx?ID=335533>

Talks & Tours

We are very happy to give talks to local groups about the history & heritage of St Helen's and the site on which the church stands. If you belong to a group who would like to visit for a tour - church or churchyard - or who would like a fully illustrated talk brought to them, then please get in touch.

We already have several groups booked in for this year but are always happy to bring the heritage of St Helen's to a wider audience.

Contact us via email: heritage@sthelensashby.net

Keep an eye on the "What's On" pages of our website and on our social media for future events.

Website: www.sthelensashby.net

Facebook: [St Helen's Church Ashby de la Zouch](#)

Email: heritage@sthelensashby.net