

THE FIRE AND THE REBUILDING OF ST.DENYS PARISH CHURCH 1985

Notes By Alan Wilson

This is an edited version of the original article.

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Jennifer Fouracres

On the evening of Friday 31st. May, at about 10.30 p.m. a Mrs. Carcas of Trelavour Square, St. Dennis, was walking her dog in Church Road when she noticed that the church on the hill above was ablaze.

She called out the Fire Brigade who made a good turn out in about four minutes, by which time it was too late to save any of the furniture or fittings of the building.

There were five Fire Brigades in attendance, those from St. Dennis, St. Austell, St. Columb, Bodmin and Fowey, they were there until 4 a.m. the next morning damping down the fire and making it safe.

A local youth was arrested and charged in relation to the fire. He was later sentenced to two years youth custody.

Later on that Saturday morning police forensic experts made a detailed inspection.

The following day, Sunday, June 2nd. the Reverend Geoffrey Perry conducted Evensong on the church green at 6 p.m. The Reverend Perry had been out of the county visiting a relative at the time of the fire. After Evensong at 7.30 p.m. a united service was conducted on the green by the local Methodist minister the Reverend Shirley Baker with all the village chapels taking part.

Many residents who had probably not attended a service for a long while but felt compelled to attend on what was felt by most villagers, whether practising Christians or not, to be a very sad occasion. The congregation numbered some four or five hundred people and the service, at which St. Dennis Band provided the music, was filmed for the next days local news coverage by the local I.T.V. station, Westward Television.

At the service an appeal for a restoration fund was opened.

The following day, Monday, the clearing up of the site started, all the rubble was sifted through for any items of value, but very little was found only part of the vergers staff and a few bits of molten brass etc.

The altar cross was broken and some of the jewels were missing, it was later repaired and the jewels replaced by the Peoples Churchwarden Michael Fouracres.

The porch and tower were undamaged, except for the first floor timber, which had to be replaced by Selleck, Nicholls Williams Ltd. It was hoped that the bells would be rung for St.Dennis Feast on October 9th. but this turned out to be impossible.

On Saturday 21st. December new wheels were fitted to number three and number five bells by Michael Fouracres, Joe Robson (Church Secretary), and Alan Wilson. The wheels had been made by Mr. Archie Snowdon of St.Stephen in Brannel.

The bells were rung for the first time since the fire on Christmas Eve 1985. The ringers were John Varcoe (Captain), Michael Fouracres, Joe Robson, Robert Fouracres, Eric Hawken, Jason Fouracres, John Gregor (Rectors Churchwarden), Bill Jenkins and Archie Snowdon of St.Stephens.

On Wednesday, 18th. December the tower was floodlit for Christmas and the tower was illuminated until the end of the "Twelve days of Christmas".

The first recorded illumination of the church was September 18th. 1895 for the wedding of the rector's niece, probably by oil or carbine gas.

After the charred timber and rubble were taken out, work began on the task of removing the plaster from the internal walls and cleaning out between the stonework for replastering.

Approximately 140 tons were wheeled out to the church car park where it was loaded by a front-end loader from Goonvean & Rostowrack China Clay Company and taken away by one of their lorries. The operation was co-ordinated by Adrian Wilson.

The cleaning and clearance work was undertaken by Michael Fouracres, Alan Wilson, Natasha Wilson, Adrian Wilson, Joe Robson, Jack Trethewey and Paul Trevenna from Whitemoor.

At this time a trench was excavated through the field beside the road leading to the church, on the Menna side, by a JCB belonging to Rex Curtis of Roche, by courtesy of Goonvean & Rostowrack to whom the machine was hired.

The trench would be used for mains water and sewerage pipes for the toilets and other facilities which were to be constructed as part of the re-building.

From the top of this trench a further trench was dug from the outer church gate to the garage by Michael Fouracres, Alan Wilson, Joe Robson and Jack Trethewey.

The soil on the hilltop was so thin that the ground was virtually solid base rock and an air compressor and hammer jack had to be used to cut the trench.

At an earlier Parochial Church Council meeting the architect, Mr. Vaughan Ellis of St.Neot near Liskeard, submitted for consideration three plans for the church re-building. Plan B was accepted in principal and detailed plans were drawn up to enable tenders to be sought.

On Monday 23rd. December a group of archaeologists from the Cornwall Archaeological Unit at Truro excavated the floor of the church interior to attempt to discover any traces of an early church or the hill top Iron Age fort that it was built on.

They discovered seven skeletons which had their burial positions recorded. They were measured and then reburied in the same locations. More graves were found but not opened. Apparently only two were buried in wooden coffins, the others were wrapped in shrouds and laid in the ground. The average depth of burial was only 15/18 inches below the floor level. The age of the skeletons was estimated at between 300 and 350 years old.

The leader of the unit promised a report of his findings (see archaeologists report).

In June 1986, Mr. Piper of Liskeard started repairing the stone mullions and surrounds of the windows. At the same time Messrs Dring and Williams, of Bath, removed the walls and pillars of the vestry in preparation of rebuilding them. They would then form the new Lady Chapel.

The stone used was Polyphant stone, from quarries near Polyphant village between Liskeard and Callington. The stone used for the repair of the West wall was provided locally by Goonvean & Rostowrack, the stone for the tower arch coming from their Rostowrack Quarry.

The roof trusses were made by A.E.Thomas, a construction company from Ponsanooth, the timber used was Oregon Pine imported from America, each truss weighed 1 ¼ tons.

The re-building work began on 14th October 1986, the main contractors being Selleck Nicholls Williams of St.Austell, the site foreman was Mr. Oswald Pascoe, of Gaverigan, near St.Dennis.

Monday the 10th. of November the new roof trusses were delivered by A.E. Thomas, off-loaded by a crane from Macsalvors of Redruth into the top of the field on the South West side of the church, to the East of the public footpath to the Came Hill road.

The whole of the church interior was fitted with scaffolding to a height level with the top of the exterior walls, and the top of the scaffolding was then covered over with boards to form a platform on which to lay the roof trusses for assembly (the trusses being delivered in three sections).

On Wednesday the 12th. at 10.15 a.m. a helicopter arrived to lift the trusses from the field and lower them onto the platform.

The helicopter was hired from Castle Air, based at Castle Motors, Trebrowbridge, Liskeard and took 1 ½ hours to lift all the trusses onto the platform without damage to the nearby tower or the roof trusses. The spectacle was watched by a large number of people including children from both village schools.

The next few days were spent assembling the trusses ready to be raised to a vertical position, in their places, by a manual winch and tackle positioned at the East end above where the altar had been.

The following week a trench was excavated in the path leading from the garage to the church for laying mains electricity cables, water and central heating oil pipes.

By the middle of January 1987 the roof was timbered and felted ready for the Delabole slates to be fixed. The slating of the roof was carried out by Richard and Rawe, of Falmouth, who took approximately 4 working weeks to lay 34 tons of slates.

In the same week that the slating commenced the electrical installation began, the contractors were Yelland and Gardner of Plymouth. The wiring was undertaken by Mr. Bryn Camps of Penwithick.

Early in the month of February a new concrete floor was laid in the church and the interior insulation of the roof began.

On Wednesday the 13th. the mason, Mr. Nigel Orchard of Probus, arrived to start plastering the interior walls.

His working methods were unusual. I had never seen their like before. He used scaffolding to a height of about four feet to reach areas of the walls that he couldn't reach from the floor, but wore stilts strapped to his legs to reach more inaccessible areas.

The small cross on the exterior of the East end gable was fitted with a new base made at Delabole Quarry. The original cross was re-used.

The old font was re-sited in its old place in front of the tower door and the new stone surrounds for the chancel and altar were put into place.

On the 14th. March a party from the church consisting of Michael Fouracres, Joe Robson, John Varcoe, Bill Jenkins, Archie Snowdon and Alan Wilson went to the Belmont Road Methodist chapel in Devonport, Plymouth, to take out pews in readiness to be transported to St.Dennis for use in the rebuilt church.

They were loaded on April 4th. and brought down to Drinnick engineering workshops on the 6th. by a party comprising Robert Fouracres, Paul Bullock, Andrew Robson, Bill Trudgian, Roger Trudgian, Michael Fouracres, Joe Robson and Alan Wilson.

The church was used for services on only two occasions between the date of the fire and its rededication, the first on the 5th. April 1987, being the christening of Damian, the son of Robert and Debbie Fouracres, of Wellington Road, St.Dennis, followed on September 12th. by the wedding of Sandra Gregor, of St.Dennis and Mark Crawford of Enniscaven.

The last few months had been taken up with varnishing the beams and painting the interior of the roof and interior walls.

The new oak entrance door was fitted and an extra storm door added to the porch. A new door was also added to the North entrance.

The second week of June saw the heating engineers start to install the central heating system. The contractors were Johnstone and Baxter of Plymouth.

On Monday 20th. of July the right hand stained glass window was installed at the East end of the church. The work took two days and was undertaken by Mr. Peter J. Skirtin, of Bumble View, The Lizard.

On the Tuesday work started laying the wood flooring. The job undertaken by a contractor from Plymouth took a week to complete.

Wednesday 5th. August saw work start on installation of the frame and door at the tower entrance. The wood was French White Oak. The Oak panels were also fitted to the East end wall behind the Altar and the new vestry would soon be constructed. The work being carried out by A.E. Thomas of Ponsanooth.

Early in August a meeting was held to discuss the new church organ and an order was placed with Hele's of Truro.

The two altars to be used were being cleaned and restored by Mr. Gordon Bullen, carpenter, of Wellington Road, St.Dennis.

The one for the Lady Chapel came from St.Marys church in Penzance and the main altar from the Helford Mission church. They were installed on September 8th.

On Tuesday 8th. September the organ builders installed a pipe organ on loan to the church until the new one was completed. It was hoped, for Easter 1988.

The following day, Wednesday the 9th. scaffolding was erected on top of the tower around the spire, to make the replacement of the weather vane safer.

The weather vane and standards were made by Mr. Ted Sparrow, a retired engineer of St.Austell, who also made a new ship for the top of the structure. These were put into place on the afternoon of Wednesday the 30th. of September by Ted Sparrow, Joe Robson and Alan Wilson.

In the evening a new flagpole, with ropes, was erected by Michael Fouracres and Alan Wilson.

The first regular service to be held in the church since the re-building was at 9.30 a.m. on Sunday the 13th. September 1987, and on Wednesday 16th. the first funeral, for Mr. Ken Lagor, of 103 Hall Road St.Dennis.

A meeting was held on the 18th. for the completion and the handing over of the heating and electrical contracts, and on the 23rd. a new lightning conductor, with earthing, was fitted by Dawsons of Bristol.

Gordon Bullen and John Kellow saw the month out by cutting the dead branches from the trees around the church green.

On the 9th. and 10th. of October the pulpit, lectern, communion rail and Bishop's chair were delivered and installed. The World War 1 memorial was also fixed at the Eastern end and the scaffolding around the spire taken down from the tower.

Sunday October 11th. was Re-dedication Day. The service was held at 9.30 a.m. and conducted by the Bishop of Truro, the Right Reverend Peter Mumford, his Chaplain and the Reverend H. Rich, together with the St.Dennis Rector, the Reverend Geoffrey Perry and his Churchwardens, Michael Fouracres and John Gregor.

The organist was Mrs. Muriel Barrett and the service was attended by around 100 people of whom 71 were communicants.

During the second week of November new gates, donated by Mr. & Mrs. Michael Fouracres, were fitted to the church car park.

The second week of December 1987 saw Hele's of Truro beginning to install the new organ. It was first used for a service on the 11th. of February 1988, with Mrs. Muriel Barrett as the organist.

The window dedicated to Thomas Hawken and Geoffrey Hawken was installed on 8th. March. The window was given to the church by Geoffrey's widow, Mrs. Olwen Hawken.

In May, the first nine pews were made and prepared by Michael Fouracres.

During September a window was installed to the memory of Police Sergeant Ronald Brenton who died on 22nd. September 1986. It was given by his parents William and Hilda Brenton, formerly of Enniscaven.

October 1988 saw the first of the cleaned and renovated pews placed in the church. It was varnished by Mr. Cecil Barrett.

A couple of years later in September 1991 a replica of Queen Anne's coat of arms was re installed by Bill Jenkins. It had been donated by Mr. Fred Biddick of Rectory Corner, St. Dennis.

The coat of arms, dated 1711, had previously hung on the North wall immediately opposite the main door from the porch, but was totally destroyed in the fire.

In February 1993 a tapestry of The Last Supper was presented to the church by Mr. & Mrs. Jason Fouracres of St. Dennis.

In February of the following year Mrs. Vera Sampson, of Mount Elgon, Hendra Downs, St. Dennis presented to the church a tapestry, which she had embroidered, depicting St. Francis of Assisi.

During October 1994 Michael Fouracres, Alan Wilson and Raymond Johnson widened the main gate by two feet four inches and rebuilt the hedge.

On February 11th. 1995 one hundred trees were planted around the church green and the graveyard. The commemorating ceremony was attended by amongst others, Lord and Lady Falmouth, Bishop of Truro, Michael

Ball, local MP Matthew Taylor and the Mayor and Mayoress of Restormel Borough, Councillor Brian Higman and his wife.

On July 9th. work commenced to remove the old boiler firing the central heating system in readiness for a new replacement.

Michael Fouracres, Jack Trethewey, Alan Wilson and Mrs. Christine Weiczorek removed nearly four tons of brick and other rubble from the boiler house.

On August 31th. the new boiler was fitted by Mr. Barry, a plumber of Gover, St. Austell, with the assistance of Alan Wilson for the electrical installation and Michael Fouracres.

The cost of the rebuilding St. Denys Parish Church totalled £360,000.

The last person to be buried in the Church Yard was Dora Ann Sheaff (née Blewett) who died on 28th. December 1994, aged 90 years.

The Church Yard is now closed for burials.

On 14th. July 2003, new gates were installed at the main entrance to the church, donated by Mr. & Mrs. Michael Fouracres.

RECTORS OF ST.MICHAEL CAERHAYES WITH ST.DENNIS AND ST.STEPHEN.

Stevyn Davey	was Rector in	1536
Zacharie Hooker	was Rector in	1643
John Archer	was Rector in	1644
George Tanner	was Rector in	1676
George Hawken	was Rector in	1704
George Rundle	was Rector in	1719
George Pamall	was Rector in	1719
William Sutton	was Rector in	1719
William Stuart	was Rector in	1720
William Leach	was Rector in	1771
Benjamin Foster	was Rector in	1773
Charles Trevannion Kemp	was Rector in	1806
William Willemott	was Rector in	1852

In 1852 St.Dennis became a parish separated from St.Michael with its own Rector

John Glynn Childs	1852-1904
W. Bevan Monger	1904-1914
John Ching Barfett	1914-1930
Claude George Sara	1931-1945
Albert Sykes	1946-1956
W. George Ellis Squire	1956-1959
William Victor Lambert	1961-1964
Frederick John Chase	1964-1969
Charles Thomas Cook	1969-1983
Geoffry Perry	1984-1992
Timothy Russ	1992 -2006

THE PRINCIPAL CHURCH OFFICERS AT THE TIME OF THE REBUILDING

The Reverend Geoffry Perry K.C.A.	Rector
Michael Fouracres	Peoples Churchwarden
John Gregor	Rectors Churchwarden
Joe Robson	Secretary
John Varcoe	Treasurer and Captain of the Tower

ST.DENYS CHURCH BELLS

	Cwt	qtrs	lbs	Note	Founder	Date
Treble	3	0	14	G	Taylors of Loughborough	1938
2nd	3	1	18	F	Taylors of Loughborough	1938
3rd	3	2	24	E	Taylors of Loughborough	1909
4th	4	0	20	D	Taylors of Loughborough	1909
5th	4	2	17	C	Joseph Pennington 1687 Re-cast by Taylors in 1909	
6th	4	3	8	B	Henry Jordan	1450
7th	6	3	20	A	John Pennington 1738 Re-cast by Taylors in 1909	
8th	9	1	27	G	Taylors of Loughborough	1909

Total Weight 40 cwt 1 qtr 8 lbs or 2 tons 22 lbs