Parish Community Letter - September 2026

We welcome members of the parish to contribute and write our Parish Community Letter.

This month, we have something rather different and special. On the 12th July 2026, as part of the Wrecclesham Community Fair, the Lychgate at St Peter's Church was officially re-opened after it was restored, having fallen into disrepair. Below, we report on how the restoration came about, including an article from carpenter Danny Tongeman, taking us behind the scenes of the craftsmanship involved.

Our opening number is excerpts of a letter written by Revd Jacqueline Drake-Smith (St Peter's Vicar until her retirement in 2025) on the 24th June 2025 to Farnham Town Council, which highlights not only the importance of the lychgate to the Wrecclesham community but the complexity that the restoration would entail.

This comes with warm greetings and blessings from myself and from St Peter's family, Wrecclesham.

For a good while now some people have been lamenting about the sorry state of our lychgate … This has especially been heightened following the formation of our amazing Wrecclesham Conservation Group … as well as members of the community joining up and becoming involved and taking interest in our tranquil and green space of the churchyard…

A huge majority of our community walk under the lychgate and through the churchyard en route to St Peter's Primary School … Indeed, there will be some who walk this path whose family have done so for generations, with many of those having loved ones resting in the churchyard.

Some kind souls ... have … asked if there was anything they could do to help renovate. I have had to explain that we need to renovate in a particular way in order to conform to the requirements laid out by Guildford Diocese when renovating and restoring historic buildings and fabric, conserving and using the original materials as far as is possible.

… we have been seeking to find the right person to restore our lychgate for well over a year now. I had sadly come to accept that this much-hoped-for restoration

would not happen during my incumbency at St Peter's, with the retirement date in August looming ever-closer – but following a timely chance- encounter, I feel so hopeful that all might not be lost after all!

I am delighted to say that … a local carpenter and craftsman specialising in working with oak wood in a traditional and conservation context actually found us! Danny Tongeman, ... upon spotting the lychgate, made contact with me … to restore the lychgate to its former glory. … Danny's passion for his work, and Wrecclesham's communal love of St Peter's lychgate will no doubt prove to be a wonderful blessing for the community now, and in generations to come.

As with all projects of this kind of specialism, it will take time and skilful craftsmanship – and the job specification and quotation for this project gives a timeframe of approximately 2-3 months at a cost of £18,000. We are pleased to say that £2,000 has already been donated … a legacy bequeathed specifically for the purpose of renovating the lychgate.

With this in mind, we are appealing to our Farnham Town Council to consider a discretionary grant for this community project of renovation and conservation…

I thank you so much for your consideration and look forward to hearing from you….

Happily, Jacqueline's letter led to Farnham Town Council becoming involved with the project, as detailed below when we approached the council for comment for our Parish Community Letter.

Councillors were very supportive of preserving this historic lychgate and commended the group for its efforts and the excellent report assessing its condition. At Full Council on 31st July 2025 it was resolved that a contribution of 25% of the cost, up to a maximum of £5,000, be pledged towards the restoration of St Peter's Churchyard Lychgate in Wrecclesham.

Councillor George Murray, who was Mayor of Farnham 2025/6, has also kindly contributed to our magazine this month, revealing more about his and the council's involvement.

I became involved with St Peter's as I live locally and read readings at the Remembrance Services and also did rehearsal for a play called Little Women in the church.

Jaqueline and I got on very well and I admired her spirit and everything she did for her community.

I knew the Lychgate was in desperate need of repair and when she asked if Farnham Town Council would be able to help, also knowing this would be one of her last acts as the Vicar… I was more than happy to champion it.

This is what Farnham Town Council does best, it supports community projects and if it can bring people together and leave a lasting memorial then all the better.

I do hope that Jaqueline has been able to visit the Lynchgate to see the wonderful workmanship. I am sure she will be delighted she touched many people with her grace and this is also a lasting legacy to her spirit and the contribution she made to the Community.

Concluding our Parish Community Letter this month, Danny Tongeman from Besp-Oak Carpentry, who carried out the restoration, talks us through how he came to be part of this special project and a behind the scenes of how he went about restoring our lychgate.

Having driven past the Lychgate on School Hill a few times, I finally decided to literally knock on the door of the church and see if I could be of assistance! The structure was significantly leaning into the graveyard and it really looked like it was needing a rescue mission. I spend a lot of my time making new oak frames. A smaller percentage of my work life is spent in restoration mode. However, I view this work as highly important and feel the sense of responsibility – to the previous carpenters who made the structure, the community and of course the sacred Oak itself.

After considering the options, I elected to remove the entire structure and repair offsite. Although the logistically more complicated option, it would yield the best result. So after all the paperwork, risk assessments and funding was in place it was time to remove the structure. Around mid-September the tiles were removed and taken back to my workshop for storage. The oak was then dismantled piece by piece. It's always interesting how intimate you can become with structure. I literally know every square inch of that structure! I needed to!

A mildly overlooked aspect of the project was the footings. There were a number

of reasons the structure started to fail. The main reason was the rainwater wasn't collected, meaning that it just saturated the base plates. These eventually and literally disintegrated. The original footings were also a little under par (understatement!). Removing the structure entirely allowed me to break out the old footings and dig down. I dug down a touch over 1200mm. Immensely deep but I wanted to make sure she had a sturdy base for the next century or two. Embedded into the concrete are stainless steel bars. These help fix the Oak base plates down and give the structure and immense sense of security.

I decided to beef up the new lower oak braces, making them quite a bit larger than their predecessors. This was the best option as putting the structure back onto four posts was not an option. It had to be returned as close to the original style as possible. Despite significant rot in the original Oak posts, I was able to salvage and repurpose some of that Oak into the new structure and also the gates. Around mid to late November the frame was ready to come back. The roof rafters were cleaned up and put back. If you look up underneath you'll see a new sarking board. A painted board which is a vast improvement on the 6mm ply that was there. Aesthetics are important!

Over the Christmas months and early into the new year I had to restore the gates. These were in a shocking state. The uncollected rainwater had rotted out significant sections of these. Again, as much as possible was kept. Splices were used to repair and blend the old and new. The ironmongery was restored by a traditional blacksmith. I felt I couldn't paint the cross of Christ black – so made the bold move to go Gold! It didn't disappoint and was well received.

Despite the Oak being the main event, materials used in the reconstruction were numerous. From concrete, blockwork, tiles, steel, lead, sand, gold enamel paint, black paint, pine boards and of course Oak.

I gathered a sense of what this project meant to the community in meeting everyone as I was working on it. It took on a greater personal significance as my father passed away on the 30th of September after working 15 days into the project. So the weight and sentiment of the project took on its own meaning for me.

The project for the most part was a huge joy and a career highlight. I learnt a lot,

met a lot of lovely supportive people. So thank you all for allowing me to be a part of your community and leave something behind for you to all enjoy visually and physically.

Thank you to everyone who has taken the time to write our Parish Community Letter this month.