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The Falkland Society

Scottish Registered Charity SC017201

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www.historicfalkland.scot

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Committee for 2025–2026: [Peter Burman](#) (Chair), [Ross Burgess](#) (Secretary), [Robeena Dhar](#) (Treasurer), [Alan Graham](#) (Archivist), [Marietta Crichton Stuart](#), [Robin Bell](#), [John Fletcher](#).

Falkland Society Newsletter, January 2026

Dear <<First Name>>,

A Happy New Year to all our members and supporters! We're working on a full programme of events for 2026, a year in which we hope to see a change of office bearers, a couple of new publications, and the start of celebrations for 50 years of the Falkland Society. Meanwhile we're still trying to improve our performance at hybrid meetings, with Alan Graham providing much-needed support to ensure a more professional-looking approach.

Our January meeting is slightly later in the month than usual. Our Secretary, Ross Burgess, will be talking to us (online and in Falkland Church) about Falkland's Historic Buildings, on Wednesday 21 January.

Meanwhile, after a couple of technical issues were ironed out, you can now view the recording of last month's talk by Marietta Crichton Stuart at <https://falklandsociety.org.uk/videos/2025-12-10-Marietta-Monuments.mp4> (or just follow the link from our Home page; all our previous recordings are also now available from our "Previous events" page).

Once again, to view this Newsletter the way we intend it, we strongly recommend clicking the "View this email in your browser" link above.

In this issue:

- [January meeting: Ross Burgess](#)
- [Church Visiting in Herefordshire and Worcestershire](#)
- [Future Programme](#)

January Meeting

Our next meeting will be at 7 p.m. on [Wednesday 21 January](#), when **Ross Burgess** will be talking about **Falkland's Historic Buildings**. This will be a hybrid meeting: online via Zoom, and in person at Falkland Parish Church.

Please join us from 6:45 p.m. onwards on the 21st, at
[The Craig Room, Falkland Parish Church, KY15 7BU](#)
what3words: [///wooden.backpacks.recipient](#)

All welcome, no charge, donations very welcome.

Or you can join us online by Zoom at: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84487113252>

or one-tap mobile: [+442080806591](tel:+442080806591),,84487113252#

Ross Burgess is a former IT consultant, now long retired, but keeping active as a part time writer and editor, and Secretary of the Falkland Society. He edited *Falkland and its People 1901–1913*, published by the Falkland Society in 2020, and is one of the team working on a similar volume for the Victorian era. He helped produce the guidebooks to Falkland Parish Church and St James's Episcopal church in Goldenacre, Edinburgh.



In 2020, following a project to collect data about the buildings of Falkland, he had the idea of recording this information in a Wikimedia-style online database – now viewable at www.falkland.wiki – and is currently working on a new, expanded version

of the *Falkland Guide*. He always welcomes new information about our historic town and its buildings.

Church Visiting in Herefordshire and Worcestershire

Part One - Acton Beauchamp, St Giles (Herefordshire)



St Giles Church, Acton Beauchamp

Before Christmas, Ross and I went to stay with friends in Bromyard, Herefordshire, and spent part of the time “church crawling” with them: visiting churches of architectural, archaeological, historic and artistic interest. In most cases the churches are open during daylight hours, or there are telephone numbers written on notices in the church porch, so you can ring up and find out where the key is kept (the most intriguing so far has been at the back of a barn down the lane about half a mile away). Sometimes a keyholder will volunteer to bring a key and say hello. Either way, the success of the system depends on trust. There are unscrupulous people, but they mostly don’t visit churches for their pleasure, as we and many of our friends do.

Another friend of ours, Donald Smith, in Radnorshire, a conservator of paintings who has worked often in churches, wrote in his Christmas card that he had recently revisited Canada: “What struck me most was how all their churches, whether protestant or catholic, are immaculately maintained, with impeccably tasteful lighting, freshly painted and spotlessly clean. But – and here’s the big but – except for cathedrals the

churches are firmly locked outside of service and Mass times.” What a pity! The likelihood is that most churches in Canada of architectural merit will be of around 1880 to around 1939, which we can loosely call the Arts & Crafts period.

It is a well-known phenomenon that people in need – ill, bereaved or in any kind of trouble or turmoil – often find it helpful and supportive to go and sit quietly in a church for an hour or so, to feel the calm and the peacefulness, which can help to “sort themselves out”.

Our friend Fr Paul Stonham, a semi-retired Catholic priest based in Leominster, will often spend a day on silent retreat at a remote ancient church. He takes a flask of tea and some sandwiches, and his breviary or prayer book and maybe some other good reading matter. On the rare occasions when he is disturbed by other visitors, he makes an opportunity of it, being welcoming, and maybe tell them about aspects of the church which are not immediately obvious to a first-time visitor. At the end of a visit, whether short or long, he will sing a short antiphon, in Latin, to the ancient hymnody of Gregorian plainchant. “The walls remember,” he says.

Another friend of ours, a Norfolk farmer, has pointed out that “A parish church is the one kind of building that you don’t need anyone’s permission to enter.”

I came to love visiting churches while exploring my native county, Warwickshire, by bicycle, during the school holidays. The experience of finding so many fascinating buildings open for free, often with guidebooks to explain their history and their artistic treasures, has never left me. The “holy places” of any civilisation are invariably special. But you have to work at it, to get to understand holy places, and to love them.

In the British Isles we have the benefit of a remarkable series of books about our architectural history. Initiated by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner (whom I knew): the *Buildings of England* series, now joined by the *Buildings of Scotland*, the *Buildings of Wales* and the *Buildings of Ireland* (not yet complete). Each series contains many volumes. As knowledge has grown, the volumes have grown more voluminous: for example, Aberdeenshire is so vast and so rich in buildings of heritage value that it has two volumes each of more than 800 pages. For seven years I had the delight of being Chair of the *Buildings of Scotland* Trust. We raised the funds for the photographs for the volumes (carefully chosen images) and for the salary of our principal researcher and author, Dr John Gifford.

One of the great opportunities of my life was to be asked by BBC Radio 4 to do a series of programmes about holy places of as many religions as

could be fitted in, not only Christian of several different kinds but also Buddhist, Islamic, Jewish and Sikh. The producer was adept at finding just the right people for me to interview at each location, and we did two for every programme, broadcast on Sunday evenings. We should really have kept the series going as there would never be any risk of exhausting the supply of wonderful places and special people.

The “stars” of our pre-Christmas visits were the church at Acton Beauchamp, Herefordshire (pronounced “Beecham”) and the church at Stanford-on-Teme, just over the border in Worcestershire, which I plan to mention in next month’s Newsletter.

Acton Beauchamp Church is not far from the thriving historic town of Bromyard, but wonderfully remote in feeling, on quite a steep hill, consisting of a west tower, a nave and a chancel.

It gave me much pleasure to see the pair of curvaceous wooden gates at the entrance into the churchyard, spelling out the words SAINT GILES, to whom the church is dedicated. The letters are cut right through the wooden framework so that you can read them going up or coming down from the church. In its own way, the gates constitute a little masterpiece of design and fine craftsmanship.



The church gates at Acton Beauchamp

One of the reasons we wanted to see the church was because the *Buildings of England* guide to Herefordshire mentions that the south doorway of the tower re-used a “very fine” piece of “Saxon, or rather Mercian” sculpture, no doubt part of a cross shaft, and probably 9th century. “9th century” is not a misprint for “19th century”. It is what it is, a sculpture that is around 1,200 years old.



Section of 9th century cross shaft, re-used as lintel of south tower doorway

That is one of the many attractions of ancient, or not so ancient, churches; they contain works of art or incorporate fragments of architecture which can be a hundred or a thousand years old.

Another point of interest is that pre-850 the church is known to have been a “minster church” (a collegiate mother church providing spiritual leadership over an extensive area served by a “college” of priests) as were the churches at Leominster and Bromyard. Here in Fife there were a considerable number of collegiate churches, for example at nearby Strathmiglo.

I often suggested to my students that if you read the inscriptions in a church carefully you will be well on the way towards understanding its history. So over the east window of Acton Beauchamp church there is the inscription “1819: Wm Dance”, which is pretty certain to be the date when the large Georgian windows were inserted throughout the church, and when the nave and the chancel acquired their plain but handsome classical plasterwork ceilings.



Interior looking east: "Georgianised" nave and chancel, old plain glass

There is something about the shape and scale of the quarries of plain glass in a Georgian interior that is very satisfying to the eye: and the quality of light that is distilled through the windows is very fine.



Chancel furnishings: 17th century Jacobean chairs, 18th century communion rails, 19th century Ten Commandments

It would be interesting to know what kind of timber structure lies behind the plasterwork. The font is 15th century, later rather than early, with sprigs of foliage carved on the underside of the bowl-shaped top. Sometimes fonts are introduced into a church from elsewhere; but the stronger likelihood is that the font has always been treasured, as the instrument of marking the beginning of Christian discipleship, and that it has been here since it was made. The south doorway into the nave is also ancient, probably late 12th century. There are a number of late Georgian furnishings – communion table, communion rails, pulpit and dado panelling, which are all credibly of the date of whatever happened

to the building in 1819. Exceptionally pretty are the four upright candle sconces.



Candelabrum and pipe organ – lighting and music are two important ingredients

Imagine how magical it must be to be at Evensong on a winter's evening with those candle sconces as the principal sources of light. That passing thought reminds me of a piece of advice given by the early 17th century poet John Donne (1571–1631), also a priest and ultimately Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, London: "Those places are most apt for prayer that have least light."

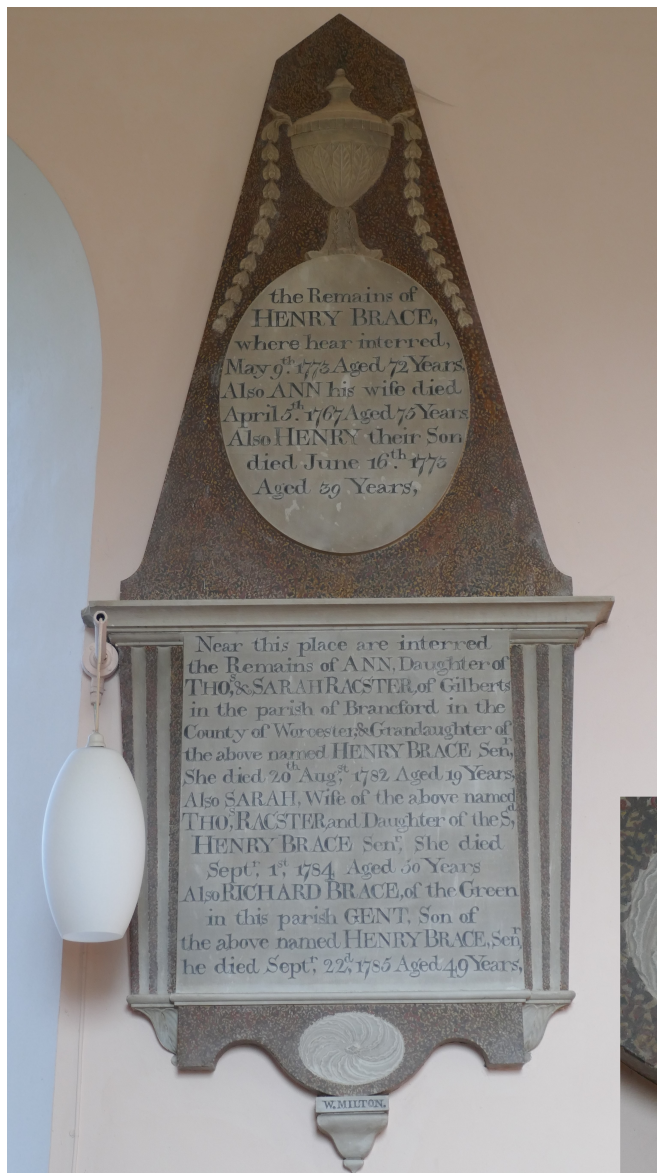
But I have not yet mentioned another important aspect of Acton Beauchamp church: its location and external circumstances. It is at the end of a public lane which then, marked by cast-iron gate piers, becomes a private drive, possibly leading to the former Rectory which is dated 1821. On the hill beyond the church can be seen the house and steading buildings of Church House Farm, of much the same date as the Rectory and indeed of the transformation of the church.



Outstanding 19th century farm buildings of Church House Farm

There is also an older farmhouse a mile and a half away, Sevington Farm, of which the *Buildings of England* volume says: "Of rubble. 18thC hipped-roofed north range, its pedimented doorway on demi-columns; gabled 17thC cross-wing."

It is clear that something considerable happened in the parish of Acton Beauchamp in the second and third decades of the 19th century: the principal farm, the church and the Rectory were all either new built or, as in the case of the church, radically repaired and re-furnished. What or who could have been the catalyst? Could it have been a new and energetic (and perhaps well-to-do) Rector? Or a new and energetic churchwarden, possibly living in Acton Court, which is another larger house in the main settlement around the cross-roads just over a mile away? There are also 17th and 18th century houses there. Whatever happened, the results are still with us.



*Pyramidal-shaped monument to Henry Bruce,
with detail of signature by local sculptor "W. Milton"*

For over 1100 years this has been a holy place, and it still draws people like a magnet and in a spirit of pilgrimage. Throughout all or much of its history the two yew trees have stood in the churchyard as silent sentinels of ancientness, continuity and sacredness.



One of the two ancient yew trees; this one is like an abstract sculpture

Peter Burman

Future Programme

Wed 21 January: Ross Burgess – *Falkland's Historic Buildings* (see main article above)

Wed 11 February: John Fletcher – *Local deer, climate change and the environment; followed by the Falkland Society AGM*

Wed 11 March: Robin Bell – *Falkland: its people in Music*

Wed 8 April: Carron Tobin, Director, Rural Solutions and founder of SCOTO – *Community-led tourism*

Wed 13 May: Craig Cameron, formerly Head Gardener and now Factor of Teasses Estate, Ceres. His talk on the revival of the Estate may be followed up by a visit to the outstanding gardens.

Wed 10 June: James Simpson – *Highlights of his architectural career* (to be confirmed)

July - August: Summer break

Wed 9 September: Joe Fitzpatrick – *Recent archaeological finds in Falkland*

Wed 14 October: John Gilbert – *Hunting with Mary Queen of Scots*

*Look out for more details of all these events on our website
and in our future Newsletters.*

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