



News and events

- Our **next meeting** will be on **Wednesday 20 May**. In **Golf in Hertfordshire 1890-1914**, Julie Moore will look at the rapid growth in the number of golf courses in Hertfordshire from 1890 onwards,
- **Codicote High Street**. Codicote Local History Society will have a special exhibition about the oldest houses in the High Street and the people who shaped them. Saturday, 25 April, Peace Memorial Hall, 11am-4pm. Entry £2. Free for under-12s. Refreshments will be available.

Owen Davys

On 13 June last year we received an email from an American lady, Mary Gillespie Greening, asking if "...someone in your history society can help me locate the Wheathampstead church where my Great Great Grandfather was rector.". The gentleman in question was Reverend Canon Owen Davys, rector of St Helen's from 1859 to 1914 and one of the most important past residents of Wheathampstead.

Exchanges of emails resulted in Mary and her husband Kenneth visiting the church on 13 April. With the help of Simon Best (Chair of the PCC) and David Hartley (Church Warden), we were



able to show them her great-great-grandfather's grave, one of the finest in the churchyard, and give them a tour of the church.

Mary then donated several items to the Society, including a conductor's staff, made of ivory with a silver band on which is engraved: "Presented by the Wheathampstead Choral Association to Revd O. Davys as a mark of esteem and respect 22 Feby 1865".



She also gave us copies of "An Arrangement of Psalter Chants" (1910) and "An Arrangement of Canticle Chants" (1914), both edited by Reverend Davys, and a charming booklet "The Elements of Music Simplified" (1903) that had belonged to her grandmother Liliias, Davys's grand-daughter, who was born in 1893 and attended a "school for young ladies" in Bedford. The "Elements of Music" are of course unchanged; the booklet could be used today.

Owen Davys was born in 1829. His father, Revd George Davys, was made Bishop of Peterborough in 1839. After ordination, Owen's first living was in 1853 at Stilton, near Peterborough, and in 1859 he moved to Wheathampstead as rector of St Helen's. Both these appointments were in the patronage of his father the bishop.

Davys's impact on Wheathampstead was immediate and substantial. First, in 1860, he



persuaded the Abbey of Westminster to transfer ownership of a plot of land at Bury Green to the rector and church wardens "to be applied as a site for a school for poor persons". Davys raised a total of £700 from a number of benefactors, including himself,

and the foundation stone was laid by Charles Benet Garrard on 10 April 1862. The first entry in the school's daily logbook is dated 29 December 1862, just eight months later.

Next, in 1865, he embarked on a major restoration of St Helen's Church (described in Bulletin 84 (September 2025)). Working with Edward Browning, the architect who had designed the school, he raised the roofs of the chancel and the nave to their original height, modified the spire and restored the windows.

In the meantime, he pursued his long-term interest in church history and architecture, joining the St Albans Arc & Arc in 1863, writing papers for their Transactions, delivering lectures, leading excursions, and becoming Joint Secretary. A leading member of the Arc & Arc writes: "While it currently has 700+ members, the Society was not always in such rude health. With a couple of other members, Canon Davys's labours kept the Society alive in the 1870s and 1880s when it was effectively moribund."

Davys published his autobiography "A Long Life's Journey, with some I met on the way" in 1913. An extract can be found on the Sources page of our website. He died in the following year.