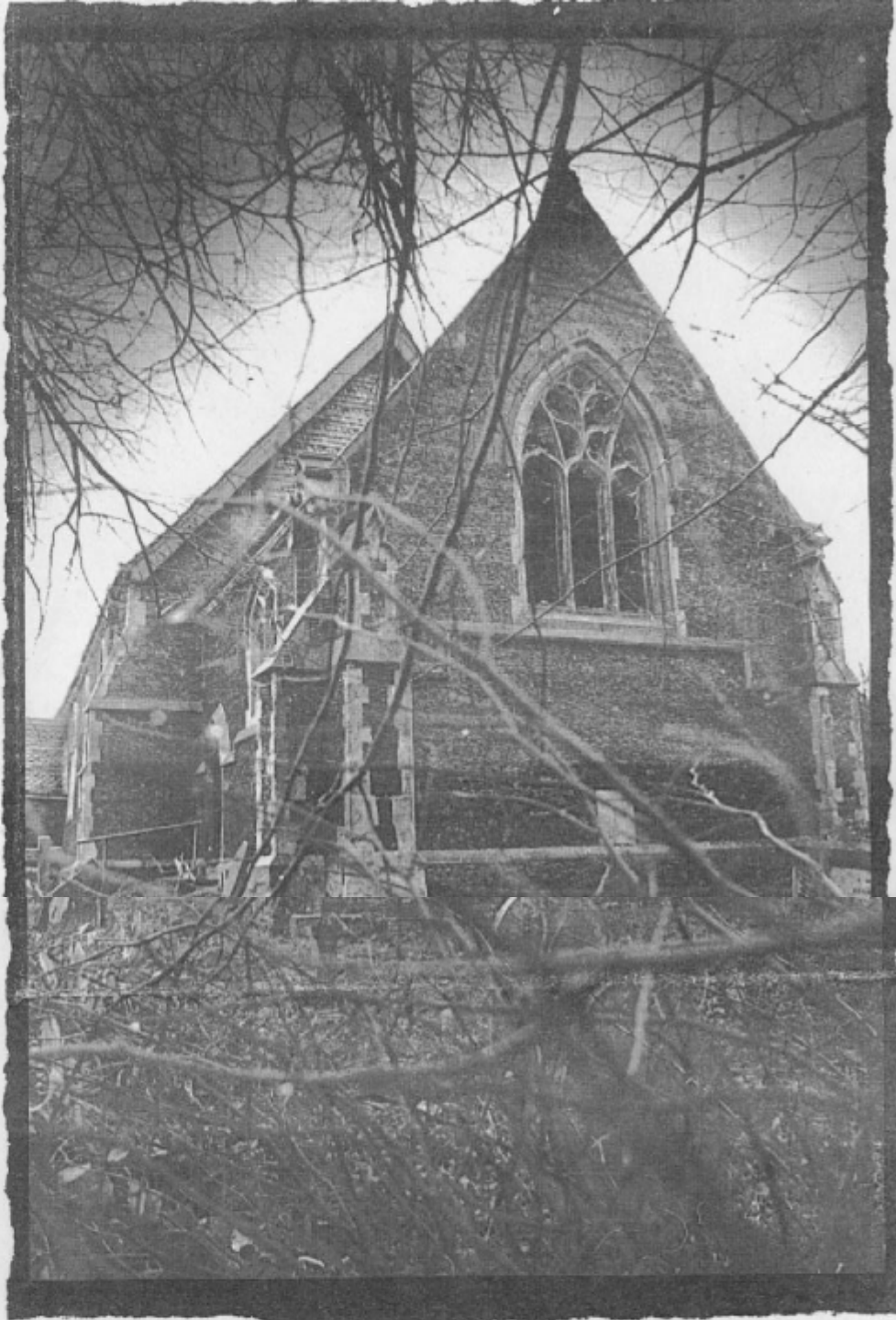




Pat Pettitt and Mary Beachor outside the 'church that breathes' in Benwick.
(Photo: T2017/17).



The church that

'BREATHES'

VILLAGERS in an isolated Fenland community are puzzling over the mystery of the church that breathes. Everyone is talking about the sound like heavy breathing which comes from the locked and semi-derelect parish church at Benwick — only after dark.

Those who believe in spirits say the 200-year-old building where half the people in the village were baptised and married, sang harvest home and Christmas carols, is making its own protest — for by December 25 this year it will have

been totally demolished.

Already everything of value, including stained glass windows, pulpit, font and pews has been stripped away.

Three weeks ago word spread like wildfire when two schoolboys lingering at night near the church first heard the sound.

One of their mates from Chatteris Cromwell Community College, Nicky Mills (14), of Cambridge Row, Benwick, said: "Soon everyone was going to the church at night to listen. It's a small village and word gets around.

"I've heard the sound several times and it's still there at night. It's like heavy breathing — sometimes so loud

you can hear it from up on the footbridge outside the churchyard — other times quiet so you have to strain to hear it right by a window of the church itself. Some people say it's an owl. I don't know what it is."

STORY: Julie Williams
PICTURES: Rowland Hobson

Mrs Pat Pettit, of 4 Ramsey Road in the village was so concerned when she and her family and friends heard the noise several nights running that she called the police.

She said: "My 24-year-old son Alan came at the weekend. He laughed when we told him the village's big news about the ghost in the church.

But after he heard the sound at 11.30 on Saturday night he could think of no explanation that fitted, and insisted we call the police.

"It's not a frightening sound. It's a compelling noise — it makes you want to find out what the matter is. And it stops if you make a sudden noise.

"The police went to the church with torches and had a look inside. They said they heard and saw nothing. I think it's something in the church preparing to be moved — perhaps saying the building shouldn't be pulled down."

Mrs Rose Bedford, of 62 High Street, has been to listen to the breathing sound three times. She said: "It's a sort of heavy breathing with a tinkle on the

end. It's not a frightening noise. Saying it's a ghost is just a village way of putting it.

"I suppose it could just be a load of birds or draught in some pipes. I don't know — except that I've never heard it in the daytime."

Parish council Chairman Albert Sismey said: "I've been ghost-hunting too. So many people mentioned the mysterious noise to me that I went to investigate at night with some youngsters, and heard a regular hissing noise. It's an owl snoring. They make that noise when they're roosting in the daytime. But I didn't go inside the church or see the owl."