

St Thomas of Canterbury Church, Goring-on-Thames, Oxfordshire

Reports of the activities of the Parochial Church Council and the Parish 2024



Open air Service 18 August 2024



**THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND**

Registered Charity Number: 1152514

This parish is a part of the Benefice of Goring and Streatley with South Stoke

Introduction and Vicar's report

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with
all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: Ephesians 1.3*

Seemingly, as ever, there were plenty of challenges, but we are here and standing, with the doors open, worshipping and ministering in Jesus' name to the village we wish to serve.

Thank you to all the vital team of PCC members and so many others taking their part. Please do read this report and reflect on so much that happens here and be reminded of all the different gifts God blesses with - spiritually and practically in this world and in each of us. This gives us hope to go forward in this year.

Some of the notable occurrences during the year are mentioned below, and many others in the rest of this report.

Together our 3 parishes of the benefice had to say Farewell to Revd Jo Allen and her family in January at the end of her curacy. Several of us went to see her installed into the parishes of Long and Little Wittenham, Culham, Clifton Hampden and Burcot as she took up her house for duty post in the Dorchester Team alongside her half time role with RM - Rural Ministry.

Without Jo and her children, it was a brave time to start "Genesis" an after-school group for Year 6. Margaret Styles was a wonderful support in this. We also worked with Anne Wigmore from the charity Reach. On 20th February after half term 2 boys came. One who continued very keenly, but after several sessions we felt it was unsustainable and so we stopped. In September we started another cohort. Again, with no children coming from Streatley it was held in Goring school. On 24th September four children came and stayed for the whole term. This has given good links; we pray for ongoing contact with them.

We continued to offer many services and events to help everyone mark Holy Week and to hold a joint service for the two church primary schools before the end of term. "Real Easter Eggs" were again given to the local undertakers, headteachers and made available through our churches. These contain Fair Trade chocolate, a book with the Holy Week and Easter happenings, and a donation goes to charity. (Sadly, they are no longer available in supermarkets.)

The Great Big Green Day on 9 June overlapped with the Gap Festival. We held a Benefice service with a food focus including jazz musicians and songs from well-known musicals but re-worded green-wise. There was a 'Question Time'-style Panel and Discussion held in the marquee alongside lots of stalls and competitions to get children growing food, with a big potato weigh in.

This year Christ Church Cathedral invited our parishioners from all our benefice to a special gathering of parishes of whom she is patron. South Stoke is one of these. On 29th September there was a Corporate Holy Communion service preceded by a lovely supper and engaging lecture on the history of hymnody. Those who went thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

Harvest was celebrated in all churches, with the schools and in care homes. Timed with this we attempted to send out a Stewardship letter to all our members and associates giving a clear picture of finances and other challenges and thanking everyone for their contributions. If you did not get one, please do complain and the vicar will make amends.

In November, for All Souls, as well as the usual Thanksgiving for the Departed service on the Sunday afternoon Matt held a very successful "Come and Sing" Faure Requiem including some moments of guided reflection and prayer with the wonderful music.

For our Ecumenical Christmas Cards going to each household, we were given permission to use a particularly interesting picture of the nativity. Thank you to everyone who again delivered them. We certainly had good numbers attending our festival services in all churches despite recent unfavourable news coverage of the Church of England.

Rev'd Ben Phillips

Overview of Parish activity

St Thomas of Canterbury Church is situated in Goring village near the banks of the river Thames. It has been a place of worship since before the 11th Century. It is one of three parishes forming the Benefice of Goring and Streatley with South Stoke, the other parishes being St Mary's, Streatley and St Andrew's, South Stoke, and part of the Henley Deanery within the Diocese of Oxford.

The Parochial Church Council (PCC) is registered with the Charity Commission since 20th June 2013. Charity number 1152514.

Church members who have served on the PCC in 2024:

Clergy:		
Vicar	Revd Ben Phillips	
Curate	Revd Jo Allen (until 14 th January when she moved to the Dorchester Ministry Team)	
Associate Priest	Revd Wendy Middleton	
Permission to Officiate	Revd Liz Dowding	
Licensed Lay Ministers	Mrs Judith Aguda Mrs Judith Hogg	Electoral Roll Officer Deanery Synod rep
Wardens	Brenda Kerr Muir Rob Howard	Lay Vice-Chairman, Deanery Synod rep
Elected members	Bridget Braham Alison Gray Simon Merritt Elizabeth Parkinson Don Shrimpton Christopher Tassell Melissa Walker Matthew Walker	Safeguarding Officer Honorary Treasurer

Mr Henry Parkinson continued as non-voting Honorary Secretary

The structure, governance and activity of the PCC is regulated under the Church Representation Rules 2022. Members of the Church community are encouraged to join the Electoral Roll and stand for election to the PCC. Responsibility for the compilation of the Electoral Roll was held by Judith Aguda. The number on the Electoral Roll reported by Judith at the 2024 Annual Parochial Church Meeting was 116.

The Parish Mission Statement is:

To understand more fully the Good News of our faith and to be more active disciples of Christ in our own community. To make our church a welcoming and relevant place in the life of the village and to take seriously our responsibilities to the wider world.

The normal pattern of services was: first Sunday - Family service and Choral BCP evensong; second and fourth Sundays – Sung Holy Communion Common Worship; and third Sunday – Good News, Service of the Word format. The 8am BCP Holy Communion on Sundays continued weekly, alternating with St Mary's. Holy Communion throughout the year was administered with the presiding priest intincting the wafer before presenting it to the recipient. The monthly Prayer Breakfast continued throughout the year.

The PCC met on 4 occasions during the year under the chairmanship of Revd Ben Phillips. There was a joint meeting of the Benefice PCC's on Wednesday 9th October when every parish was represented and it was good to be together. The Vicar and Wardens of the Benefice also met approximately every 8 weeks. In between these meetings the Vicar, Churchwardens, PCC Treasurer and Simon Merritt corresponded as a Standing Committee, mostly by email, to consider urgent business and formulate the PCC agenda. The Vicar and Wardens of the Benefice also met approximately every 8 weeks. The APCM on 11am on 28th April was conducted with church members present.

The life of the parish and group activities run to enhance and further the aims of the Mission Statement including *Digging Deeper – Exploring God together* a course starting in January and continuing in June. This was followed by the Story of Scripture on alternate Tuesday mornings starting in September. This was a course giving an overview of the story of God's loving purposes revealed in Scripture to help us see the big arcs of narrative amid the trees.

During Christian Aid Week, we planned to deliver envelopes to people's homes with a note asking them to take their donations to Jack's or Inspiration for Goring and Streatley, or the Village Shop in South Stoke. It seemed to work well raising a total of £2,040.

The 4th July - General Election had a specially prepared booklet following the run-up to the actual day.

Also, in June, we supported the Great Big Green Day held in the Village Hall and Rectory gardens with all sorts of stalls offering bicycle repairs, Re-wild your garden, Local produce stall, Bird Box making etc.

We were part of the Goring Gap Festival with the Papagena concert in the Church, How to make Fabric baskets, Japanese woodblock Printing, Pen and wash Watercolour painting and Acrylic Landscapes workshop all in the Canterbury Room.

Clare Stephenson joined us for the final year of her training, and she was ordained as deacon in Ely Cathedral on Sunday 30th June. Ordination marked the end of her 3-year training at Ripon College, Cuddesdon, and the beginning of ordained ministry in the Church of England. She started her new role as curate at the University Church in Cambridge on July 1st, 2024. She said it was an absolute delight to worship in all three of the churches of Goring, Streatley and South Stoke during the last 9 months of training for the ministry, and she will always remember the very warm welcome and encouragement she had received when she took part in services. She will keep the Benefice in her prayers.

We held a Churchyard working party at St Thomas' on Saturday 5th October.

The weekly newsletter continued to be a vital support and communication channel to church members throughout the year. We are most grateful to Jill Kirby for putting it together and to all those who prepared the intercessions - we now used Roots prayers alternate weeks. People continued to be added to the circulation list and a paper copy was delivered to homes for those without internet.

The PCC is indebted to the small band of people who faithfully unlock and lock the church door each day so that the building may be a place of welcome, solace and refuge for those who are passing and choose to enter.

Statistics in the Service Register during 2024 sadly continued to show reduced attendance throughout the year – pre-pandemic 85-90, post-pandemic 45-50. There was success at the services at Easter and Christmas with a lot of people attending. Over the year, we celebrated 2 Baptisms, Bishop Gavin conducted a Confirmation service in July at which Bill Bird and Enrique Dubovicky were confirmed, there were 3 Weddings and 14 Funerals or Thanksgiving services and 4 funerals held at the Crematorium as well as 4 burials of ashes.

Brenda Kerr Muir & Rob Howard

Churchwardens' Report of Actions, Fabric, Goods and Ornaments of the Church

2023 Quinquennial Survey

Henry Saunders, an Architect from Oxford did the quinquennial inspection last year, and we received the report in October. The introduction to the report states *'The church is generally in a very good condition, it is clearly well used and well cared for. This is a testament to the care that the PCC takes in looking after St Thomas.'* The actions identified in this report reflect the generally good condition that the church is in.'

Henry Saunders states that the most important is

- 1) *The repair to the Chancel floor where it has broken up.* (see below)
- 2) *Review of the sizing of rainwater goods, especially to the north.*
- 3) *Review the external render and consider removal.*

2018 Quinquennial work

Our contractors JG Restoration have completed most of the work for the 2018 quinquennial report. The relaying of the red Chancel tiles has been delayed, mainly because of the difficulty of finding suitable tiles. By the time of the APCM, it is hoped that the tiles will have been re-laid, and the loose stone step and tiles in the apse also re-laid.

Electrical Work

SSE, our electrical provider has recently raised the charge on two of the Churchyard lights nearest the lychgate. This is a monthly charge and we have to pay for them the whole year, irrespective of the consumption. To reduce this cost and electricity consumption for all the exterior lights we are making two changes:

- Connecting the two lights nearest to the lychgate to the Church supply so that we only pay for the electricity we use
- Change all the lamps in the external lights to LEDs

We have applied for a faculty for this work and waiting for an estimate from our electrician, Steve Bowdery.

Archdeacon's Inspection.

John Blair, the Area Dean, did the inspection in November last year. John conducted the inspection with common sense and pragmatism. A new, comprehensive pictorial record had been made of the silver and brass. Further information was provided on the requirements for the Terrier contents. It was agreed that this Terrier should contain at least summary information of major building and repair works undertaken including contractors used.

Graveyard

Tom Worthington and Rob Howard met with a tree surgeon Alan Braclik early in December to agree a scope of work to maintain the trees. We have permission to do the work from South Oxfordshire District Council and it will be done late in December to suit Alan's other commitments and avoid the nesting season. Most of the work involves pruning to remove dead branches or improve access around the trees.

We are also obtaining a quotation for new, shallower steps with a metal handrail, connecting the north door to the drive. These will replace the old steps which are precipitously steep and lack a handrail.

Rob Howard & Brenda Kerr Muir

CMS Mission Partners – Steve and Lindsey Poulson

When I re-read the link letters from Steve and Lindsey for 2024 I am constantly reminded of their energy, enthusiasm and strong faith and belief in the power of prayer to guide them in their work with Proyecto Alas. In March 55 students were in primary or secondary education, 5 in trade schools, 3 at university, 1 attending the police academy and 1 in the military academy.

Their mentoring centre is busy, but Steve is aware of some failures, so this year began an intervention programme to maintain a relationship with children who have dropped out and hopefully encourage them to return to education. Sometimes it seems progress is slow but they have their successes.

Marbeli once roamed the streets preferring the freedom rather than attending school but during the year the team have seen a transformation, she is flourishing at school attending the centre regularly and they pray this will continue. Sadly Brayan, who has been studying nursing for just under 3 yrs and was set to graduate at the end of the year decided in the Summer to apply for and was granted a visa for a three-month job working in USA at a carnival. Alongside pressure from his family there is the mindset in Honduras that there will be opportunities abroad which will always outweigh a career or long-term job prospects at home. The hope is now that after three months he will decide to return home and continue with his studies. Within Proyecto Alas the team recognise that although opportunities are provided for young people, they have to make lifestyle choices which may not be in their best interests.

After reviewing the financial support the programme was providing for the young adults studying in Tegucigalpa it was decided it was time to give them more responsibility. Thus, now instead of some of their costs being managed by the programme, they receive a monthly allowance and with guidance this will help them to budget.

Cafe Alas opened a second coffee shop in January and Carlos, the manager of the first one has moved with his family to manage this in Siguatepeque. Carlos has grown in faith since he joined PA in 2022. He was initially confused and had little time for Christianity but over time observing Christian values in action he has begun to actively participate in prayer and attending a local church. This is an exciting venture for Carlos and his wife Carolina and prayers are needed for this little family as they adapt to their new surroundings. It is a blessing that Carolina's family live close by.

Work to replace the roof of the building which houses PA started at the beginning of the rainy season with inevitably flooding and considerable damage. During this time daily project activities were moved to the home of Lorena, sub director and the café ran a delivery only services from the employees' homes. After patiently waiting the refurbished building reopened in the Autumn with space for businesses, a psychology clinic and hair salon which are planned for 2025.

Steve continued with his studies in UK and returned to Honduras via Brazil where CMS held a first gathering to discuss pioneering work in Latin America. Besides sharing their individual experiences, the participants planned to connect with others doing similar work and importantly to create partnerships where they can draw on the experiences and expertise of local people.

The highs and lows of the past seven years since Steve first went to Honduras were acknowledged in the Summer when a hundred people involved with Proyecto Alas gathered together to celebrate. With their prayers and love for the project it is remarkable how much Steve and Lindsey have achieved in such a relatively short period of time.

We are all delighted to know that Lindsey is pregnant and they are expecting a baby to be born in March. Mother and baby are keeping well and they plan for their daughter to be born in Honduras. Scarlet, who is 24, with guidance and help from the project has just gained a nursing degree and now works in a local clinic. How wonderful if in her professional capacity Scarlet can offer support to Lindsey and baby daughter.

Their monitoring work continues to make a difference to the lives of many young children in Honduras and we offer our prayers and continued support to Steve and Lindsey and the team at Proyecto Alas in this coming year.

Jackie Brookes

Goring Church of England Primary School

Each week we have welcomed either Ben, Nigel or Wendy into school to lead us in collective worship. The youngest children in Greenfinch class love welcoming Wendy and the rest of the school enjoy the variety that Ben and Nigel's worship brings.

We celebrated in St. Thomas', with Streatley School, for our Easter Celebration. We also had our year 6 Leaver's Service in church which was attended by all our year 6 children and their families. The Harvest Service and Carol Service were also very well attended.

We have been delighted by the success of Genesis club. A weekly after school club, led by Ben and volunteers from St. Thomas', for our year 6 pupils. Although only a few attended, the feedback was extremely positive. We are hopeful that the club will continue this year too.

Thank you to all at St. Thomas' for your ongoing support.

Angela Wheatcroft, Headteacher

Communications

This year we have continued to send out a weekly newsletter to over 250 e-mail addresses and this is also uploaded to our website each Friday. The website version receives a varying number of readings, often over 100, and many more around Christmas and Easter. **We are always happy to receive articles and photos for the newsletter by e-mail to officeofgsandss@yahoo.com.**

We continue to be very grateful to Geoffrey Horne who delivers around 20 physical copies of an extended newsletter with a weekly thought, psalm and prayers to people's houses in Goring and Streatley. Thank you also to Catherine Coulson who delivers further copies in South Stoke.

We produce an A5 sheet (usually on coloured paper) for everyone in church on Sundays with the week's collect and space for your sermon notes which you can keep as your weekly bookmark and prayer prompt.

We regularly send articles to the Goring Gap News, the South Stoke newsletter and to Genie, the electronic village newsletter. We again had an ecumenical Christmas card printed for all homes in Goring, Streatley and South Stoke and thank Wendy for sorting these into folders and all who delivered them.

As noted above, the website is another source of information for people and Robin Middleton, Henry Parkinson, Jenny Hall and Simon Merritt do sterling work adding articles and bookings for the churches and Canterbury Room.

All of this takes a lot of time so please do read what you receive and keep us informed of any news! Thank you.

The Benefice Office Team

Musical Outreach Project

We are at the point where the organ project has concluded, and we are now focused more on using the accompanying outreach funds. The instrument is more or less settled, and although it still throws us the occasional fault (as with all instruments of that size and complexity), we have not experienced a severe service-jeopardising issue for some time (other than the power cut during the storms!). It is such a benefit to liturgy and privilege of the organist and choir to have such a fantastic instrument that is kept in such decent shape. It provides a great instrument for tuition, allows us to achieve all repertoire, will attract talent from afar, heightens the quality of music, and means that many people, both choir and congregation, choose to worship at St Thomas with some travelling some distance to do so.

We have appointed our first organ scholar, Toby Best, who is progressing extremely well, and we also have Tom Cordle from the youth choir who has begun lessons and is shaping up nicely for a future position should he want it.

We have run three 'come and sing' events this year: a beginner's group, a children's day and the Faure Requiem. We constantly evaluate the feedback given and we hope to put on more sessions in due course focusing on different areas of music and ability. Recruitment can be challenging but we hope that our come and sing events may encourage some people to join and we have discussed different levels of membership to encourage people who aren't too sure or have conflicting commitments (e.g. just joining for evensongs once a month).

Lots of things have thrown spanners in the works over the last year: teething issues with the organ, floor repairs in the choir, my own conflicting plans trying to organise a wedding etc... However, as I have now become established and got to grips with how things work here, I am hoping to develop a regular recital series for the organ and possibly visiting choirs as well.

I am so pleased with the support from the wider community in these endeavours and especially those helpers who volunteer their time to help out for events.

Matt Foster

Church Choir

I am happy to be writing my first music report for St Thomas' choir. Having now been here for a year and a half, I can say I am extremely happy with having been offered this role and hope to stay here for as long as possible.

I write this whilst still coming down from the spiritual and musical high that was our carol service. I am constantly astounded by the choir's willingness and ability to rise to challenges and how strong the community is. It is always a pleasure to welcome singers from the wider benefice and see faces from previous years who obviously still hold onto a strong love of the church and its community.

I have been doing my best to balance known repertoire with new and exciting works and the balance appears to be keeping the choir engaged, constantly developing, challenged, but not overwhelmed. We are pleased to have welcomed Toby Best as our first organ scholar. He is progressing extremely well and I hope that in the future, this will also open up more opportunities for the choir as there is a lot of music out there which is very difficult to achieve without both an organist and conductor, with myself often filling both roles, or alternatively Elizabeth or Emily valiantly multitasking - singing whilst also trying to bring everyone in at the right time. I am so privileged to be surrounded by such amazing, willing, and helpful musicians.

I am extremely grateful to Mal who has been helping me clear out and reorganise the library; for Peter and Alun who help produce our weekly service sheets; and the members of the hymn committee under the excellent leadership of Alun. We have been pleased to welcome Martin and Clarie Leckie, and Joanna Almond, as regular additions to the choir.

We are discussing the future of the youth choir. Due to the unfortunate gap of Covid, many of our young singers are not so young anymore and it is difficult to recruit young people in single units as it can be quite daunting for them. Rather than trying to poorly

maintain the current set-up, we are discussing the possibility of starting from scratch once the current youth choir naturally moves on, recruiting a larger number in one go, and offering specialised free tuition which may contribute to getting parents on board (the most crucial factor in chorister recruitment!)

Matt Foster

Music Committee

The committee met three times during the year to choose hymns for the 9.30 Communion Services, Good News Services and Evensong. We received a few requests from members of the congregation and would welcome more. We were very sad to lose Joan Fountain from the group with her wise and valuable contributions and generous hospitality. We were then pleased to welcome Mary Plowman as a new member from the congregation.

Alun Hughes

Coffee Volunteers Rota

The coffee after the first Wednesday Communion service has been served all year and we have been serving refreshments after some of the Sunday services. We have managed to offer coffee most weeks. We were also able to serve mulled wine and mince pies after the Carol Service in December which was welcomed by those who stayed.

We were short of volunteers, particularly for the Sunday service, at the start of the year and this hasn't changed, so we will need some more people to help if we are going to be able to provide coffee every week in 2025. If anyone is able to help us about once every two months it would take some of the pressure off the existing group. I do know that the chance to meet and talk after the service is very much appreciated by many people so I hope that we will find enough helpers be able to serve coffee regularly again.

I am very grateful to the volunteers and I would like to thank them all so much for their support.

Hazel Shrimpton

Pick-a-Flick

We have had another happy year at Pick-a-Flick with people getting together to watch a film followed by a simple lunch. The atmosphere is warm and friendly, and people obviously enjoy the informality of the occasion.

When space permits, helpers enjoy sitting and chatting with people over the lunch of a delicious homemade soup, cheese and dessert.

Sarah Fraser

Prayer Breakfast

Prayer breakfasts take place on Saturday morning once a month, from 8.15 to 9.30. After coffee and croissants, one person introduces a theme with a bible reading. We talk about the theme and then start to pray, firstly about issues which have come up in the discussion and then for the work of the churches in the benefice, including the upcoming services, study groups and any planned events. We also pray for individuals as appropriate, and any pressing issues. There is no pressure on anyone to pray aloud if they prefer not to. Attendance varies between 3 and 12. We would love for more people to join us.

Judith Aguda

Ecumenical Groups

Ecumenical means representing several different churches and the churches represented this year were the Catholic Church (Goring and Woodcote), Church of England (all three churches in the benefice) and the Free Church. Different churches, with people who believe in the same God. These Ecumenical gatherings are a wonderful opportunity to develop one's faith, meet new people, bond with those we already know, share our faith journey or to ask questions.

We followed the booklet from Embrace the Middle East for Lent, entitled Healing and Hope in the one household of God. The literature was perfectly timed as our prayers continued for peace in the Middle East conflict. Healing refers to restoring health physically, but also to wholeness and restoration in relationships. The material both encouraged and challenged our demonstration of faith with questions such as how can we offer healing and hope to those on the margins of society? Or how do we make room for everyone in the one household of God? There were four groups that met during Lent and we completed the course after Easter with the wrap up session where everyone came together with an opportunity to reflect and share.

For advent, we tried a different format of book that had more 'storytelling' and less structured questions. The book, 'Waiting for the Light' by William Delia, described real life situations that related to the Bible readings, calling us to be ready, to be peacemakers and encouraging our walk with God. There were three groups that met regularly for four weeks and a follow up session after Christmas that brought everyone together to feedback their experiences.

We are always looking for more people to host or lead, so if you would like to get involved, please do get in touch.

Catherine Coulson

Flower Arrangers

It has been a quiet year with no special occasions to mark, other than our usual church festivals. The team of flower arrangers have continued to provide altar flowers week by week and some have begun to use artificial flowers in their arrangements. These 'blooms' are of such a high quality these days that it is hard to distinguish the real thing from the artificial, especially when accompanied by fresh greenery! They have been much admired. I feel that this is a practical and sensible approach now that fresh flowers are so very expensive.

Two of our team of arrangers have stepped back from the responsibilities of being on the rota. Jenny Worthington and Judy Crawford have reluctantly withdrawn, for health reasons, after giving so much time to providing really lovely arrangements over many years. We thank them both very warmly for their generous contribution. They have left memories and photographs too of so many attractive arrangements and Judy's Christmas tableaux on the font cover have given so much pleasure to countless children over the years.

It is now important that we recruit some new flower arrangers to join the rota if we are to continue to provide flower arrangements.

Jenny Boyd

Goring and Streatley Bell Ringers

Both Goring and Streatley bells continue to be rung for Sunday services and on special occasions.

As part of the Goring Gap Festival we were able to have the use of a portable mini ring which was erected in the Rectory Garden. This elicited great interest from a number of children - possibly budding ringers of the future? The ringers were able to enter the 6-bell striking competition in the Reading branch and although we didn't ring we performed very well. In August a very successful and enjoyable ringing trip was organised by one of our ringers. This entailed ringing at 5 churches and partaking of a pub lunch.

Ringing practices at Goring have continued to thrive and with the help of visitors from neighbouring churches we continue to challenge ourselves. Fortnightly practices for the less experienced continue to be held at Streatley, with the occasional trip to South Stoke.

Josie Irving

Churchyard maintenance

The volunteers recruited as a result of Ben's advertisement in the GGN appealing for help to undertake the maintenance work – John Turner and Richard Ball - have continued doing a sterling job in strimming throughout the summer and autumn and also mowing most of the close-mown areas. In addition, Simon Yaxley (owner of Grahamsfield) has continued mowing the fairly large area near his house, timing this to suit himself. This has been very helpful by reducing the extent requiring John and Richard's input. All three are owed very grateful thanks.

Ben regularly does a significant amount of tidying and disposal work and has again arranged for volunteers to contribute to this ongoing task – thanks are also due to them. Ivy growing on walls – but not on trees - has been greatly reduced by cutting at ground level and allowing to die *in situ*.

I continue to remove bushy growth from graves and other areas where it is inappropriate. My schedule of possible tree work has been approved, Rob and I contacted two potential contractors and though only one responded in a timely manner he seemed ideal for the work and quoted an acceptable cost and was appointed. Rob then completed the necessary application to SODC which has been approved. Unfortunately, the approval came too late to allow the work to be carried out before the nesting season so it has been deferred until December when the contractor will again be available. It involves removal of one of the cherries beside Manor Road (now moribund), removal of other self-sown saplings and bushes, variable trimming of other trees and the cutting of ivy part-way up the trunks of mature trees. This will minimise long-term risk to tree stability but leave the ivy as a valuable wildlife resource at lower level on the trunks.

The churchyard management for wildlife could be much better, but in the absence of a dedicated team of sufficient people to do the necessary work the current management is probably the best we can achieve with our limited resources. The Notice at the church door explaining the lack of close-mowing everywhere is good in its aim to deter complaints.

Tom Worthington

Deanery Synod

The two big issues that have occupied most of Synod's time during 2024 are the Parish Share and the Deanery Mission Plan. For the last few years, the Deanery as a whole has failed to pay all of its Share, though this Benefice has paid 100%. In 2023 it only paid 79%, with which the Diocese was not very happy. The options given were to enter a Recovery Plan or to undergo pastoral reorganisation with a reduction in stipendiary clergy.

We have agreed to pay a lower Share as a Deanery, though some Benefices would continue to pay the full amount. This would increase each year until 2028, when it is expected that at least 95% will be paid. The conditions attached to this are that each church will be a member of the Parish giving Scheme (we are), each church will have a cashless giving option (we do), some parishes will need to have a giving campaign in the first two years, each parish should engage with the topic of giving once a year (we do). Rebates for prompt payment will be suspended until the Deanery pays 100%.

There doesn't seem to be a possibility of the Deanery Share being reduced, most of which is spent on clergy stipends. However, we are looking at the distribution of the Share within the Deanery.

The Deanery Plan has put forward ideas as to how we might work together and support one another in the Deanery. The areas in which we might do things together were Youth, Care for Creation, particularly being a eco-friendly churches, Spirituality and worship, including having a Deanery Quiet Day and a Prayer Card.

We had just one meeting with a speaker at which Sara Kandiah gave a most interesting talk about the Eco-Church scheme. This involves a survey which guides and helps churches in their progress to "going green" and to work towards Eco Church awards. Much of this we are doing already in this Benefice.

Our usual Synod barbeque was held at Remenham, which was a good opportunity to socialize with other Synod members and to get to know one another better.

Election to Diocesan Synod for the next triennium took place in July, when Anne McDermot and Judith Hogg were elected to represent the Deanery.

Judith Hogg

Safeguarding

The Benefice Safeguarding Group continues to meet and I would like to thank Jill Kirby and Lesley Longden for their work on safer recruitment, DBS applications and record keeping and Alison Gray for her hard work and support across the board.

I continue to be a member of the Diocesan working group formed to share experiences and look at pragmatic solutions to some of the issues facing us. In November I attended a workshop to provide input to the Audit of the Diocesan Safeguarding activities (a five year programme covering all Diocese across the country).

At the January PCC meeting we approved the Safeguarding Policy and a Policy for Recruitment of Ex Offenders and agreed a list of Benefice Activities and an updated Checklist and Action Plan for the coming year. Throughout 2024 we made progress on ensuring that all recruitment meets National Safeguarding requirements, on encouraging the take up of training and on agreeing an appropriate level of procedures for safer activities within the churches. The focus for 2025 will be continuing this work and endeavouring to fill any gaps. We also hope to host a safeguarding training event across the Benefice later in the year as part of the wider aim of increasing the profile of safeguarding requirements and embedding a positive safeguarding culture.

The PCC has a duty under section 5 of the Safeguarding and Clergy Discipline Measure 2016 to have regard to House of Bishops' guidance on safeguarding children and vulnerable adults. The PCC believes it has complied with this duty.

If you have any questions or concerns do not hesitate to get in touch with me (safeguarding@stthomasmaryandrew.org.uk or Tel: 07903 140 436) or a member of the Diocesan Team. Contact details are displayed on our website and in the Churches.

Bridget Braham, Safeguarding Officer

Gift Aid

In this calendar year 2024, because of tax-paying donors completing a simple declaration, which then enabled the tax to be re-claimed on their donations, the income to the church was augmented by a total of **£18,966**. This additional income received from HMRC through Gift Aid came from three sources:

1. **£6,310** claimed from donations made directly to the church;
2. **£11,327** returned from donations made to the church through the Parish Giving Scheme;
3. **£1,329** from the 'Gift Aid Small Donations Scheme' which enables the church to claim a 'top-up' payment on money received in the plate collections and wall safe. (NB this scheme runs over tax years, so this figure relates to the tax year ending on 5th April 2024.)

If you do not already gift-aid your regular donations and would like to do so, all you need to do is to fill in a simple declaration form. This can be for donations made either directly or via the Parish Giving Scheme which an increasing number of our regular donors are making use of.

Thank you to everyone who enables this additional income to be claimed through use and support of the Gift Aid Scheme.

Henry Parkinson

Financial statements of the PCC for the year ending December 31st 2024

For these please see the separate report which includes the audited annual accounts.

Don Shrimpton