

St Andrew's Church South Stoke RG8 0JS



Annual Report & Accounts

South Stoke Parochial Church Council

Year ending 31 December 2025

Sunday 27th April 2026 12.00

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Overview of Parish activity

St Andrew's Church is situated in South Stoke village near Ridgeway and 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 Thomas of Canterbury in Goring and St Mary's, Streatley, 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 2025:

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Clergy: | |
| Vicar | Revd Ben Phillips |
| Associate Priest | Revd Wendy Middleton |
| Permission to Officiate | Revd Liz Dowding |
| Licensed Lay Ministers | Mrs Judith Aguda Mrs Judith Hogg |
| Wardens | Vacant |
| Electoral Roll Officer | Sine Shaw |
| Elected Members :- | Joanna Brook Michael Codner Theresa Higgs Honorary Treasurer Sally Horton Robert Small Tower Captain (Deceased January 2026) Amanda Smithdale 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 Sine Shaw. The number on the Electoral Roll reported by Sine Shaw at the 2025 Annual Parochial Church Meeting was 18.

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.

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The normal pattern of services was: first Sunday - Family service; second and fourth Sundays - Holy Communion Common Worship; and third Sunday – Good News Service.

The PCC met on 4 occasions during 2025 under the chairmanship of Revd Ben Phillips. There were PCC meetings on 13th January, 10th March, June 16th and 13th October. The APCM was conducted at 12am on 6th April with members of the congregation present. Our thanks to Sally Horton for allowing the PCC to meet at her house.

During Christian Aid Week, we delivered 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 £2,064.

The life of the parish and group activities run to enhance, encourage, support and welcome all within the community. 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.

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.

Introduction and Vicar's report

Another year which could not be described as dull!

God is at work and we continue to be surprised and encouraged in small and big ways. Our worship of almighty God has continued and our church building to be a place where we give time to meet and encounter God together and to seek His will and way.

Thankfully we have kept the doors open in our church every day. We have been so thankful to George and Kevin Druce who have done this physical unlocking each day for many years, but also a huge thank you to everyone who participates in the life of your church, giving generously to pay the bills and very importantly to provide a welcome to those who come to visit and join us for worship.

Refreshment, interest in and engagement with everyone is a blessing we all have a part in. None of us is called to be a Christians on our own.

*“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, **not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing**, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”* Hebrews 10:24-25

In a world where it seems to be increasingly hard to get commitment from people, a willingness to volunteer and take on roles of responsibility' we thank God for all who vitally hold together

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the nitty gritty and service represented in this report. We are particularly indebted to Amanda Smithdale who does so much and picks up so many loose ends for us all and pushes on the agendas we need to engage with and to Mike Codner who prepares for all our services so thoroughly encouraging and enabling as many as possible to take an active part.

The monthly coffee mornings continue to engage a wider circle with hospitality.

Please read it and delight and pray for the coming years.

Of particular note and input have been the Bereavement Café (see report below) which was literally a place of transformation. Over the course of the year we saw the heart-broken discovering they were not on their own and that that they could and were going forwards through their grief. At the end of the year they were ready to let the group come to a natural end. With the very able Melissa and Matt Walker we are planning to offer a different course this year hopefully reaching a wider audience.

The other has been the Ministry Calling Group (see report below) which has built up the individuals involved, but also the depth and repertoire of our services, adding resilience and promise to the body of the church for years to come.

Holy Communion was delivered to Communicants in the summer and the PCC resolved to continue that practice, but no-one is obliged to receive the wine. The Bread on its own is sufficient receiving of and remembering Jesus.

I appeal to you all to pray for revival of our own faith, and the community around us with a deeper placing of ourselves in God's hands and asking Him to be central and Lord of all we are and aspire to. "Thy Kingdom come..."

Reverend Ben Phillips

Burial Ground Extension

The determination of the planning application submitted in 2024 to extend the burial ground has been deferred until the end of 2026 to allow sufficient time to explore the cost and options to satisfy the following objections, detailed below. These are principally from the Environment Agency and the Forestry Officer:-

The arboricultural impact of the proposed development must be presented in an Arboricultural Impact Assessment. The arboricultural impact assessment should evaluate the direct and indirect effects of the site proposals and where necessary recommend mitigation.

Following the submission of these two reports below sent to the Environment Agency, after their initial objection, their response to the investigative works undertaken was as follows;

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- *Observations on the St Andrew's Church Burial Ground Extension Tier 1 Risk Assessment by WHS. Dr W. G. Higgs.*
- *St Andrew's Church Burial Ground Extension. Tier 1 Risk Assessment. Ref WHS10201 V.1. 16 April 2025. Wallingford HydroSolutions Ltd.*

We have reviewed the above documents. The site is a relatively small extension site (approximately 0.09 HA) and a low burial rate (2 – 3 per year), but there are some important data gaps that remain to be investigated. The reports confirm that the site is in a highly sensitive and vulnerable location in regard to groundwater with water levels relatively close to the surface. The report goes on to confirm that it is unclear whether the conditions for exemption or standard rules permit requirements can be met. In addition, there are no details of burial density or total burials proposed at the site. With all this in mind, we consider it is necessary to seek site-specific empirical data and monitoring data as evidence to indicate if any burials at this site could lead to any impacts to groundwater quality.

Further discussions are therefore currently ongoing to determine the most cost effective to satisfy the above objections. The objective being to satisfy and reach a positive outcome with the Environment Agency before undertaking further costs associated with an arboricultural impact assessment. The PCC and South Stoke Parish Council are working and funding this process jointly

Amanda Smithdale

Report of Actions and Maintenance of the Church

Quinquennial Report

The latest Quinquennial Report was undertaken by Henry Sanders of Hestia Architects Ltd on 25th February 2025. The full report was received in February 2026 and reviewed by the PCC in March 2026. The full report is available from the Benefice Office.

The PCC were reminded that in almost every case repairs will require either List B or Faculty Permission and application to the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) will be necessary. In all cases therefore reference should be made to the Faculty Jurisdiction Rules 2015.

The main issues identified in the latest report were:

- 1) Clearance of rainwater goods and gulleys. The rainwater goods require redecoration. The rainwater goods are believed to be undersized; plan to replace with larger fittings.
- 2) The investigation of the causes of damp within the church and initiate a strategy for improvements.
- 3) Undertaking works to protect the medieval window, walls paintings and carved medieval stonework.
- 4) Ease the door to the WC to allow all users to use it.
- 5) There is moss growth to the north as expected. Minor repairs are needed: 1) 3 no broken tile to the north of nave. 2) 1 no slipped to nave north. 3) 3 no broken tiles to chancel south. 4) 3 no broken tiles to chancel north. 5) Potentially allow to replace/reinstate 15-

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20 no across all roofs. The tower roof is lead; again, this appear to date from around the year 2000; based upon an eighty-year design life the roof should be expected to need re-laying in 2080.

- 6) The North of Tower downpipe was blocked recently and overflowed down the wall, causing staining. The lower portion of the above downpipe is cracked and this should be replaced.

St Andrew's has a maintenance plan that follows the progress of works and identifies the priorities versus desirable. Our thanks go to Will Higgs who has managed the maintenance programme throughout 2025. However, since he is unable to continue in that role into 2026, interim measures are currently in place to ensure any essential works are carried out by approved contractors.

Amanda Smithdale

CMS Mission Partners – Steve and Lindsey Poulson

The year began with 65 children and young people being served at the mentoring centre in Talanga, Honduras. 53 of these children and young people are registered for the new school year and the remaining children the staff are trying to reach. These children are very much connected to life on the streets.

They now have 5 full time members of staff: increasing the part time psychologist, Fernanda to full-time, and hiring a new education co-ordinator, Abi. And of course, the rest of the staff, Lorena, Christian and Sergio.

5 young adults are continuing their education and another 5 who have left school are benefiting from the mentorship programme.

Throughout the year Proyecto Alas have provided after school sessions for the children and young people. Each session has time for homework help and tutoring and throughout the course of the week they participate in rotating events such as library time, crafts, cooking, games, recreation and some religious guidance.

A Boy Scout group was started for 24 children and young people who were interested and Proyecto Alas staff helped to coordinate with the Honduras representatives of the Scout movement.

In addition to the work with the children and youth, Proyecto Alas provided educational scholarships to 6 young adults and 4 mothers of children involved in the mentoring programme. All either completing secondary school or working on university degrees.

The Alas staff also offers regular support and encouragement to the parents, (usually single mothers), of the children and young people through monthly breakfast events, home visits and psychology services as and when needed. During the year they were also able to help with several medical emergencies covering the cost of treatment and care.

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As usual the group welcomed visits from mission teams from the U.S. churches, who enthusiastically helped with building projects, maintenance and activities for the children and young people during their stay in Honduras.

Proyecto Alas celebrated its 8th anniversary as a project in June and has now established a local board of trustees as part of the process of establishing the project as a non-profit organisation in Honduras.

Unfortunately, due to lack of staff and customers the decision was made to temporarily close both coffee shops that were created to help support Proyecto Alas. However, the barber shop, run by one of Alas young people continues to thrive and is a source of income for the project.

On a positive note, during the year, 6 of the 12 street connected children and young people mentioned earlier in this report registered for school and began regularly attending the mentoring centre.

Of course, one of the highlights of 2025 was the birth of Lindsay and Steve's baby daughter Elizabeth Milagro in March. As she grows she is a sociable little girl delighting in the attention she gets from anyone involved in Proyecto Alas. It was a pleasure to see the family during their September visit to U.K. They managed to visit all three churches in the Benefice and gave an update of their work to parishioners with tea and cakes in the Canterbury room.

Their enthusiasm shines through in all the letters we receive through CMS and we offer our prayers to Steve, Lindsey and the team at Proyecto Alas in this coming year.

Jackie Brookes

Communications

This year we have continued to send out a weekly newsletter to over 250 e-mail addresses. The newsletter is also uploaded to our website each Friday morning. The website version is read by a varying number of people, 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 physical copies of an extended newsletter with a weekly thought, psalm and prayers to the housebound in Goring and Streatley. Thank you also to Catherine Coulson who delivers further copies in South Stoke and others who take on this task if Catherine is unavailable.

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. We encourage you to take this home with you to keep as your weekly bookmark and prayer prompt.

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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 everyone who delivered them.

As noted above, the website is another source of information for people and Robin Middleton, Henry Parkinson and Jenny Hall do sterling work adding articles and bookings for the churches and Canterbury Room. Melissa Walker has very kindly taken on the **Benefice Facebook page** ("Goring Gap Churches – St Thomas, St Mary's & St Andrews") so please do find and "follow" this page.

We hope that you enjoy reading what you receive and please do keep us informed of any news! Thank you.

The Benefice Office Team

Heal the Gap Bereavement Café

From the beginning of 2025, we began running the Heal The Gap Bereavement Café, meeting monthly to offer a warm and welcoming space for those navigating personal loss. This was the first time St Thomas' had introduced the café in this format. Having previously run a small number of bereavement courses, we felt it was the right time to try something a little different and see how a more informal, ongoing gathering might serve our community

The response throughout the year has been very encouraging. Each month was well attended, clearly reflecting the need for gentle and accessible support. It has been particularly heartening to welcome not only people from within our own community, but also others from slightly further afield, showing how valuable this kind of space can be.

Each month, thoughtfully prepared reflection questions were offered to help guide conversation and encourage deeper sharing within the group. These prompts gave participants opportunity to pause, reflect and, if they wished, share something of their own journey. Discussions were often moving and meaningful, yet there was also space for warmth and companionship as friendships gradually formed.

Feedback from those attending has been overwhelmingly positive. Many shared how much they valued being able to speak openly in a safe and understanding environment. Several commented that the café had become an important part of their personal grief journey and that they genuinely looked forward to gathering each month.

Of course, no café would be complete without refreshments. Tea and coffee were served alongside a generous spread of biscuits and cakes, all of which were happily enjoyed. One participant kindly baked delicious rock cakes for us during the year — so delicious, in fact, that they rarely lasted long on the table. Around the tables there was thoughtful conversation, gentle support, and — at times — much chat and even laughter, reminding us that moments of lightness can sit alongside grief.

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We concluded the year with a delicious Christmas lunch, offering a special time of fellowship together. During this gathering, we also paused to remember loved ones who had gone before us, holding them in our thoughts as we marked both loss and hope within our shared community.

The Heal The Gap Bereavement Café has quickly become a valued and much-appreciated ministry within our benefice, and we are grateful to all who have supported and participated in it throughout the year.

Melissa Walker

Ministry Calling

This year we led a training course for those who felt called to a greater level of service and ministry. Six church members met monthly and with input from Wendy and Ben, they then took it in turns to lead the Good News Service in Goring and South Stoke. Mutual feedback and support have been a vital part of this. They reflect that they have learned and grown in this process and it has brought an added depth and variety and different insights and an exploration of more people's testimony.

This gives us a blessing and a resilience in our service planning and cover when our regular clergy are not available.

Ben Phillips

Pick-a-Flick

We have had a happy year at Pick a Flick and it continues to be well-attended with people meeting others for coffee, a film and lunch. It is an informal community get-together with a warm atmosphere and people say how much they enjoy coming. We try and choose films that will appeal to everyone, and the cost of attending remains at £5, with any surplus funds being distributed between the three churches in the benefice.

We have a group of loyal volunteers who enjoy helping make the occasion such a happy one and, when time and space permit, sitting and chatting with people over a delicious lunch of homemade soup, cheese and a dessert.

Sarah Fraser

Prayer Breakfast

Prayer Breakfasts are held once a month, usually on the last Saturday in the month, in the Canterbury Room. The actual date is in the monthly Benefice Calendar and on the relevant weekly News Sheet. We start at 8.15 with coffee/tea and croissants and then look at a short Bible passage and discuss it. After this we pray for the upcoming church services, activities and events. We also pray about what is going on in the world and for individuals who need particular support at the time. We aim to finish at 9.30 sharp.

The number attending varies between three and eight or nine. We would love to have more people join us as prayer is so important to the health and growth of our churches. Everyone is welcome!

Judith Aguda

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Ecumenical Groups

Parishioners from local churches Our Lady and St John, the Free Church and St Thomas' in Goring, Christ the King, Woodcote, St Andrew's, South Stoke and St Mary's in Streatley came together to explore the chosen material for the Lent and Advent groups.

For both events there were four groups, of roughly 10 people in each, that met for 5 weeks for Lent and 4 weeks in Advent, followed by a plenary session after both, allowing the groups to fellowship and reflect on the course. The groups met in people's homes: two morning groups, one afternoon and a group that met in the evening.

We used the Embrace the Middle East's Lent booklet, Hope in Hard Places. Whilst we continue to pray for healing in the Middle East, we were asked to look inward to explore where we are challenged. When life is extremely difficult, the question is often asked, where is God in all this? We can feel abandoned, like Job, or unheard, like, Hannah. But God calls us to live in hope that he is in it all with us. Hope that is not whimsical, but steadfast.

For Advent, the chosen book was 'Long Ago in Bethlehem' by Amy Scott Robinson, which focused on the book of Ruth, admiring how Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi travelled from Moab to Bethlehem, and comparing their journey with that of Joseph and Mary from Galilee to Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus. The course was well received, perceived as a little different from what had been studied previously, offering plenty of discussion issues, with opportunities to relate their situations to today's world.

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

Catherine Coulson

Deanery Synod

John Blair stepped back from his role as Area Dean, having pulled together a Recovery plan agreed by the benefices of the deanery to move from only paying 79% of its share towards the target of a full share of the costs of ministry across the Diocese. Jeremy Tayler was appointed in his place and we thank God that this year, thanks to much generosity, we paid a much higher proportion. Goring Streatley and South Stoke continue to pay their full share and help in this mutual support and charitable endeavor. Thank you all and thank God for all that comes from Him.

Goring hosted the Synod summer BBQ this year which was a great occasion of fellowship.

Ben Phillips

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LLF - Living in Love and Faith

Goring hosted an evening with our Area Bishop and Archdeacon who reach different conclusions on the issue of same sex blessings. They explained how they justify this through Scripture and missional reason. This was open to all our congregations and to those of other churches in our deanery.

The PCCs then all had very thoughtful and thorough chances to discuss this question. We were determined that there are no subjects that we cannot talk about, listening carefully to each other and those who honestly reach heartfelt and faithful, but different, positions on subjects.

Voting was taken on whether the Church Councils would allow blessings of committed lifelong partnerships to take place when allowed to do so. Every church passed this by a significant majority. No church was unanimous and we wish to continue to follow this open hospitality to each other on this and other subjects. Only God is the final judge on all matters. We are all inclined to get things wrong and we all need his grace and mercy. We thank God for his presence and guiding in these debates.

Thank you to our PCC members and for all the responsibility they take and do for us all.

Ben Phillips

Safeguarding Annual Report – 2026

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 Oxford Diocesan working group formed to share experiences and look at pragmatic solutions to some of the issues facing us and in March I attended a workshop and focus group to consider the future of Parish Safeguarding responsibilities in the Diocese.

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 together with an updated Checklist and Action Plan for the coming year. Throughout 2025 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 2026 will be on continuing this work and endeavouring to fill any gaps.

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.

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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

Bell Ringers Report

We were all devastated when Robert Small died unexpectedly in January 2026. Robert was Tower Captain at St Andrew's for more than 20 years and worked tirelessly coaching and mentoring new and established bell ringers, overseeing the maintenance of the church clock, bells and tower and pro-actively contributing to the PCC in all matters. He did so much over the years to ensure that the bells in South Stoke rang out to mark the important local and national events and conducting tours of the belfry during village events such as the May Fayre. His generosity and gentle courtesy in the bell tower will always be remembered.

It is also sad to report the loss of another bell ringer, Ian Millar. Ian lived next door to the church and again, was a proactive contributor helping Robert keep the tower maintained and the bells ringing out.

The bellringers continue to practice most Thursdays as well as for church services and village events. A regular new feature in 2025 being that they are joined by bellringers from Streatley and Goring once a month for practice. This has helped broaden the skills and scope for method ringing at St Andrew's and we are thankful for those who give their time to teaching so generously.

Amanda Smithdale

FLOWER ARRANGERS AND COFFEE MAKERS

The good news is that we have a new Flower Arranger who joins us in time for Easter. We still have 4 Coffee Makers on the Rota. Many thanks to them all.

Also, the Coffee Morning takes place on the 4th Wednesday of the Month and is usually well attended.

Sally Horton