

The Parish of Stoke St Mary (with Thurlbear)

In the Seven Sowers Benefice

**(United Benefice of Beercrocombe, with Curry Mallet,
Hatch Beauchamp, Orchard Portman, Staple Fitzpaine,
Stoke St Mary (with Thurlbear) and West Hatch)**

Annual Report and Financial Statements of the Parochial Church Council

For the year ended 31st December 2020

Incumbent

The Benefice is currently in vacancy

Bank

Lloyds Bank
31 Fore Street
Taunton
TA1 1HN

Independent Examiner

Alison Horsey
Fairways
West Hatch
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The Parish of Stoke St Mary (with Thurlbear) – Annual Report for the Year 2020

Introduction

The ecclesiastical parish of Stoke St Mary (with Thurlbear) contains two parish churches, namely the church of St Mary the Virgin, Stoke St Mary, and the redundant church of St Thomas, Thurlbear. The two churches are located in the centre of their respective villages.

The parish forms part of the Seven Sowers Benefice, comprising the parishes of Beercrocombe with Curry Mallet, Hatch Beauchamp, Orchard Portman, Staple Fitzpaine, Stoke St Mary (with Thurlbear) and West Hatch. The parish is part of the Deanery of Ilminster, which in turn is part of the Diocese of Bath and Wells within the Church of England.

The Parochial Church Council (PCC) is a charity excepted from registration with the Charity Commissioners.

The Benefice has been in vacancy throughout the year but a new incumbent is to take up the post of Rector in early 2021.

During 2020 the PCC continued to support the Ministry Team in promoting the whole mission of the church – pastoral, social, evangelistic and ecumenical – within the ecclesiastical parish. The Revd Christabel Ager served in the Benefice as Associate Minister and the Revd Stephen Jones as Associate Vicar, throughout the year. The Ministry Team further comprises the licensed lay readers Brian Crudge and Sue McKen. Clive Hayward is Reader Emeritus. Holly Stevens, the Children's, Schools and Families Worker, returned from maternity leave in February; during her absence her post was backfilled by Julie Kimber and Ruth Tucker on a shared basis.

The PCC is responsible for the care and maintenance of the Grade II* listed church building in Stoke St Mary and the surrounding churchyard. It is also responsible for the churchyard of St Thomas's Church, Thurlbear, where the church building itself is maintained by the Churches Conservation Trust.

The service rota, which ran until the beginning of the first of the Covid crisis national lockdowns on 23rd March, provided for a service in St Mary's on three Sundays each month as follows: first Sunday: 8.30 am BCP Communion; second Sunday: 10.00 am Parish Communion; fourth Sunday: 10.00 am Worship-for-All. On the third Sunday and, where appropriate, on fifth Sundays a United Benefice Service is held; the third Sunday service being held always at West Hatch and the fifth Sunday service alternating between Orchard Portman and Beercrocombe.

From the commencement of the first lockdown, the church remained closed for public worship. When circumstances permitted public worship to recommence, the service pattern at St Mary's changed to holding one service at 10.00 am on the second Sunday of each month. From the start of the initial lockdown, the Ministry Team hosted an online service each Sunday on Zoom.

Membership

The method of appointment of PCC members is set out in the Church Representation rules. Members are elected at the Annual Parochial Church Meeting. All Church attendees are encouraged to register on the Electoral Roll and to stand for election to the PCC.

PCC members who served from 1st January 2020 until the date on which this report was approved were:

<i>Incumbent:</i>	Vacant	
<i>Associate Ministers:</i>	The Revd Christabel Ager The Revd Stephen Jones	
<i>Churchwardens:</i>	John Pugh Colin Clarke	<i>(Treasurer)</i> <i>Stood down 16th November 2020</i>
<i>Deanery Synod Representative:</i>	Tom Mayberry	<i>(ex-officio)</i>
<i>Elected Members:</i>	Brian Crudge Elizabeth Fothergill Roger Millard Peter Renshaw Graham Salter Roger Smith	<i>(Lay Reader)</i> <i>(Chairman)</i> <i>Stood down 28th December 2020</i>

John Pugh served as acting secretary throughout the year.

Church Attendance

At the time of the Annual Parochial Church Meeting in 2020 there were 39 parishioners on the Electoral Roll. The weekly attendance at services varied from a minimum of about 8 at an 8.30 a.m. service up to 30 or more at other regular services. As noted in the introduction on the previous page, the country went into lockdown on 23rd March, in response to the Covid crisis. For several months the church remained closed for public worship on. From 9th August until the end of the year, there was only one regular service in St Mary's each month, on the second Sunday. To maintain safe social distancing, the capacity of the church was set at 35.

Sidesmen and Sideswomen

Sidesmen and Sideswomen are appointed for the year and are organised by Peter Renshaw. In 2020 they were Rosemary Burgess, Colin Clarke, Tom Mayberry, John Pugh, Peter Renshaw, Roger Smith and Rachel Woolvin.

Other Roles

Other members of the congregation provide essential support to the work and worship of St Mary's Church by serving as bell ringers (Tower Captain: Rachel Drew), flower arrangers and cleaners, and by serving on the coffee-making rota. The Sacristan is Rachel Woolvin and the church architect is Annie Evans. The principal organist to St Mary's is David Bidgood.

Review of the Year

Twenty-twenty has been a year of extreme contrasts. St Mary's has been buffeted by the same storms of the Covid crisis that have rocked the rest of the country. Our worshipping life has been turned upside down, just as our everyday lives have been. Amidst this turmoil, we were shocked by the sudden death in late November, after a very brief illness, of Colin Clarke, our church warden for the last eight years. He was a great supporter of both St Mary's and the wider Seven Sowers Benefice and his death leaves us all much the poorer. It has been an honour to have known and worked with him.

The Benefice has been in vacancy since the beginning of November 2018 but, in mid-November 2020, a candidate presented herself for interview. The interview panel, representing all the churches in the Benefice, were able to interview her over Zoom and, in early December, in person. There was unanimous agreement that the Revd Joanna Porter would be an excellent candidate for Rector. We anticipate that she will be able to take up her post around about Easter time and look forward eagerly to welcoming her and her husband into our community.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the Covid crisis caused a fundamental rethink of the way we worship. Through the newly-found innovation of Zoom and the determination of our non-stipendiary Associate Minister, we were able to offer a morning service across the Benefice. For those unable to connect to the internet, a service sheet was posted out in advance of the service. This proved a real lifeline during lockdown but, even when we were able to return to worshipping in church, there were those who felt the need or desire to self-isolate for whom the Zoom service continued to offer much appreciated access to worship in our Christian community.

When permitted to do so, we opened the church for private prayer. The rules around 'track & trace', the requirement to note where visitors had sat and to avoid others sitting in the same seat, to clean thoroughly after each visit, to provide adequate hand sanitizer etc, made this an onerous task and the decision was made to open only for two hours every Sunday afternoon. Potential visitors were kept fully informed through the Stoke St Mary Newsletter and through clear signage, posted on the notice board and church door. Throughout the early summer there was a steady flow of people taking up this opportunity.

When Benefice churches finally opened for communal worship in late July, we decided to leave St Mary's locked when there was no service scheduled and to open it for private prayer only by prior appointment. This appeared to work well.

There were a number of special services held in the last two months of the year. On account of the restrictions on numbers in church, the Armistice service on 8th November was held outside in the churchyard and 42 attended. In lieu of an Advent carol service at St Thomas's, Thurlbear, we held a private prayer hour; fifteen attended during this time of quiet contemplation. With communal singing not permitted in church, the traditional Christmas carol Service was re-thought as a reflective service with recordings of Handel's Messiah alternating with readings from the bible; Tom Mayberry sang two wonderful carol solos, to organ accompaniment. In order to hold the traditional crib service on Christmas Eve in a Covid-safe environment, we put on two separate services with an hour between each to allow time for cleaning. Parents were asked to restrain their children from wandering around the church but, despite this, it was clear that everyone had enjoyed themselves. The year concluded with a worship-for-all service on Christmas morning, taken by the Children's Worker; she too demonstrated a beautiful singing voice in a solo rendition of Marys' Song.

The PCC held four meetings during 2020, plus the annual meeting, of which only the January meeting could be held in person. All other meetings were held over Zoom. Peter Renshaw chaired all the meetings. The medium of Zoom did not in any way restrict the breadth of subjects discussed by the Committee, although two of our members were not able to join in and had to pass their observations to the Chairman in advance. The aspiration of the Benefice church warden group to hold joint PCC meetings across the Benefice had to be put on hold.

Almost all the activities of the church came to a halt, including the work of the Children's, Schools and Families Worker, Holly Stevens. As a consequence, it was decided to furlough Holly from mid-April until the start of September; ongoing communications with families was maintained in her absence by Julie Kimber, who commenced employment as the Benefice administrator during the year. When schools did return to the classroom, no external parties were permitted access to the buildings. An innovative approach to the work with 'Open the Book' was found of filming the players performing the pieces, for use by the schools in their assemblies.

The PCC always takes a close interest in Thurlbear School and was pleased to learn that the leadership of the Head, Steve Gillan, and the commitment of the teachers and support staff since the start of the pandemic had been an example to us all. The school remained open throughout the summer, including holidays and some weekends for vulnerable children and those of key workers, as well as providing distance learning for those at home. In September, the school reopened to all children, taking full account of all Government guidelines.

Fundraising came to an abrupt halt in March but not before the successful 100 Club had started its fourth year. We are immensely grateful to Roger Smith for having organised this since its inception and are very sorry that Roger has decided to step down from the PCC to care for his wife. We wish them both well and a speedy return to good health for Sandra.

We have made good progress with the work outlined in the 2019 quinquennial survey. The masonry work and reglazing of three windows has been completed. We also took advantage of a legacy received in 2019 to install protective wire grills over the three Reyntiens windows.

PCC funds again received a welcome contribution from the Benefice Magazine, which succeeds in raising money primarily through the sale of advertising space. Its contribution to informing the wider community about events related to the church is a vital medium of communication.

Financial Review

Total receipts on the General Fund were £14,614 and total payments £17,734, including a transfer to the Community, Mission and Charitable Fund of £1,462. The income in the year was sharply down but helped by the contribution from the Benefice Magazine and from the 100 Club. The largest item of expenditure (£13,714) was the Parish Share, paid to the Diocese, which is shown here net of a rebate of £492 received in December to recognise the financial hardship being faced by church communities. Charitable and other donations amounted to £1,188.

The unrestricted funds (comprising the General Fund and the Community, Mission and Charitable Fund) had an excess of payments over receipts in the year of £2,846.

The Fabric Fund had receipts in the year of £6,130 (including a legacy of £5,000) and outgoings of £10,635. The balance on this fund at the year-end stood at £25,516.

Reserves Policy

The PCC has had a policy of maintaining a balance on unrestricted funds, if possible, equating to approximately six months' unrestricted payments. This policy was aimed at covering any unforeseen emergency situations that may arise. At 31st December 2020, the balance on the General and CMC Funds of £7,257 equated to 152 days of payments, a deterioration on the 187 days for last year. The PCC are conscious of the need to monitor this statistic and to avoid any further deterioration.

It is the strategy of the PCC to invest the monetary assets of long-term funds, including the Fabric Fund, in deposits with the Church of England Deposit Fund. Surplus monetary assets, which may be required at shorter notice, are held with Lloyds Bank on current and deposit accounts, as appropriate.

Independent Examiner's Report to the PCC of Stoke St Mary Parish Church For the Year Ended 31 December 2020

I report to the PCC on my examination of the accounts of the PCC (the Charity) for the year ended 31 December 2020 which are set out on pages 1 to 10.

Responsibilities and basis of report

As the Charity's trustees (i.e. the members of the PCC) you are responsible for the preparation of the accounts in accordance with the requirements of the Charities Act 2011 ('the Act').

I report in respect of my examination of the Charity's accounts carried out under section 145 of the 2011 Act and in carrying out my examination, I have followed all the applicable Directions given by the Charity Commission under section 145(5)(b) of the Act.

Independent examiner's statement

I have completed my examination. I confirm that no material matters have come to my attention in connection with the examination which gives me cause to believe that, in any material respect:

1. accounting records were not kept in accordance with section 130 of the Act; or
2. the accounts do not accord with the accounting records.

I have no concerns and have come across no other matters in connection with the examination to which attention should be drawn in order to enable a proper understanding of the accounts to be reached.

Mrs Alison Horsey
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Date: 15th January 2021