

It's easy enough to forget, but 2024 was St John's 175th anniversary year and we marked it with a couple of special events. The Anniversary Evensong in July, as close as possible to the actual date the church was consecrated, was a glorious occasion which brought together so many friends and well-wishers from other churches as well as ourselves. Coinciding with Heritage Open Day I did a tour of monuments and graves around the building which again was very well-supported and some of the research surrounding that has carried on, so we find out more and more. The Quiet Garden also marked its 20th anniversary and held a celebratory tea.

2024 was in addition a year of change for us and for the community at large. The Roman Catholic parish with whom we share the church building faced questions about their future arrangements but in the end those were resolved at least temporarily by spreading the clergy thinner across a wider area. After 18 years as head teacher of Farncombe Infants School, Andrea Simonsson left ushering in a new era in which the school is linked with Loseley Fields and managed by Joe Bibby as Head of School. The school proceeds towards academisation but we retain our legal link with it and the Christian distinctiveness of the school remains unchanged in law. We also reassessed our administrative arrangements and concluded that the Office Manager's role was redundant, leading to Sharon Gleave leaving us in April. Chris Sollars has very efficiently taken on the bookings element of the old office manager's role on a voluntary basis.

St John's continues to be used for a variety of community occasions, from Paul Rivers's Civic Service in June to hosting the Air Cadets enrolment ceremony and acting as a polling station for the General Election. Our group for lone parents, Single Tracks, came to an end but Sue Petty began a different initiative, the crafting group Cotton On which arose out of suggestions made at Kettle's On. The Quiz Night is now an embedded event in our calendar alongside the Spring Fair and Village Show. More specifically spiritual events and aspects included hosting Richard Flenley on his ordination placement from Chiddingfold parish, holding a Slow Mass as part of Lent last year to enable people to think through the eucharist in detail, hosting the World Day of Prayer in March which coincidentally was based on material devised from Christian women in Palestine, and visiting Rachel Mulligan's stained-glass studio in August.

At the start of the year we were trying to work through the ideas included in the last Development Plan: as usual, they've only been partly achieved. For instance, I wanted to find someone to act as a 'publicity manager', to photograph events and post them on social media, but while photos *are* taken I still post them if they get posted at all! The diocese's children's work consultant Andy Saunders visited the Toddler Group and was very complimentary about our work, but efforts to try and cross-publicise other groups and spiritual possibilities are actually quite hard to manage without someone specific to do it. Attendance at services has on average been ticking up slightly but it's worth noting how variable it can be. We had over 80 souls in church for the 10am service on Palm Sunday 2024, for instance, but about half that for an ordinary parish eucharist only a month later – where was everyone! Messy Church attendances can vary hugely from one gathering to the next depending on the weather or other events, a jam-packed occasion followed by one with hardly anyone at all!

We are now at the start of another round of what the Diocese calls the Parish Needs Process and which used to be entitled Mission Action Planning. I must say I maintain a little scepticism about this. The first time round it was sold as a way of the diocese working out what help the parishes needed in realising their goals. For us, in practical terms, this meant, as I've mentioned, Andy Saunders telling us we were doing the right things (all very well) and sharing some ideas for other things we might do, which were either surprisingly hard even if they seemed easy, or impossible without people to do them. I wonder whether the whole business is rather a case of saying to the Lord, 'this is what we want to do, now you resource it' which I think he is unlikely to respond to. That doesn't mean my mind is closed to change. In November and December I attended the diocese's training on kick-starting youth work in parishes where there isn't any and the *quid pro quo* for me having five nice meals at Ladywell Convent is that I am actually expected to come up with something, so we will be

planning some kind of simple group or event building on what contacts we do currently have with young people. I'm also thinking about the possibility of a very short Sunday morning service squeezed in after our 10am aimed at families with young children and a monthly contemplative service on a Sunday evening, for which I will need some kind of help! I'm unsure about the long-term future of the online Compline service or Forest Church neither of which have achieved what I wanted. The future, then, doesn't simply look like the past: it has to be open to the possibility of change.

Over the year we said goodbye to Sharon Lewer after her relatively short struggle with cancer; Hazel Hall; and Sandra Harris. As always our sadness at loss is tempered by thanks to God for the faith and goodness which their lives were such a witness to.

While he was churchwarden Geoff Coote took on a burden of responsibility beyond anything that could have been expected of him. I'm grateful too to Michael for his support and Helen Gee for stepping back into the churchwarden's role after Geoff's resignation in November. Last year I gave the first Rector's Award to Graeme Pullen and I have two to give out this year, one my own selection, and one suggested to me. Firstly (and I mentioned him last year), I would like to call attention to our 2nd- and 4th- Sunday organist Matthew Mott, who works with such diligence and flexibility, especially when it's discovered at the last minute that the Rector has got something wrong. As well as playing during services Matthew is here early on at least two mornings a week practising to make sure the music is right, and practising *very very quietly* so nobody outside the church gets disturbed. And second, a range of church events and activities are made very much easier by the efforts of someone who usually does his work away from the church building, producing posters, fliers, banners and so on. David Holt's honorarium for producing the Villager covers his costs but doesn't cover all the editing, contacting potential advertisers, and delivering copies to local businesses and settings where they are distributed. So this year David gets a Rector's Award!

But beyond these named individuals I am thankful as ever for all you do for God's work here at St John's. We are a community of his people brought together by his mercy and grace, and strive to respond by service to him and to his children beyond this place. May we do so all the more joyously through this coming year.

April 2025