

# STAMP

AUTUMN/WINTER 2023 MAGAZINE

ISSUE 60



THE PARISH OF ST MARY & ST PAUL  
HEMEL HEMPSTEAD

£1

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Cover Picture:

'No room at the inn' is a feature of the Christmas story with which we are all familiar. However, whilst you might expect to find a traditional Christmas graphic on the front cover of this issue based on images of wise men following stars, shepherds and sheep in the fields with angels, or donkeys carrying Mary, I have chosen an image, the like of which can be seen on our streets any night of the year - those for whom there is still 'no room at the inn' nor anywhere else or find themselves facing hardship or despair in these difficult times.

In our Christmas celebrations let us pray for them and give thanks for all those people and groups who seek to alleviate the plight of those who have not chosen homelessness as a lifestyle.

In our own area we have DENS, The Salvation Army and the churches, Street Pastors, Citizens Advice, The Samaritans, The Highfield Fridge, Liberty Tearooms and other groups and individuals whose stories are frequently told in the pages of this publication - three in this edition alone.

Jeff Wallis

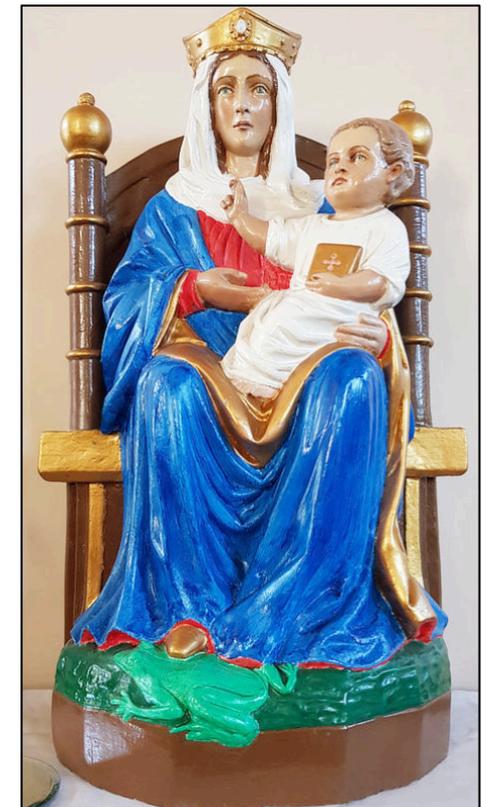
## FROM THE EDITOR

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We have come to the end of the first year of sharing St Paul's with the Roman Catholic Ordinariate, a year which overall has passed smoothly. It is good to have an enhanced Christian presence in Highfield, visible through such co-operation in our church to doubling the number of services on a Sunday and to welcome at least twice as many people through our doors on that day. With the success since August of our Thursday Anglican Morning Prayer meeting and the pending Ordinariate Thursday evening experimental initiative, we feel that we are moving forward. It has been encouraging that both the Ordinariate and the Anglicans are welcoming new faces as people move into Highfield.

The reader may feel that there is a paradox in this situation. The Anglican St Paul's congregation were amongst the first to welcome female priesthood, illustrated by being served by four women priests over 25 years. It is understood that the Ordinariate primarily was formed by Anglicans leaving us because of their opposition to female priests. Yet here we are together, however separately worshipping God in the same building. Well that happened earlier, over the 40 - year period before the Roman Catholics left because of a shortage of priests locally.

Principle and pragmatism have brought us together again.



*A figure of St Mary provided by the Ordinariate to St Paul's. It originally stood in the Chapel at H.M. Prison Wormwood Scrubs. See page 15.*

# STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF THE PARISH CHURCH COUNCIL

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On 20 November the PCC was delighted to learn that, in the context of the projected 2023 budget deficit of £4,730, there may now be a small surplus.

However, the 2024 budget presented by Brian Crawley indicated a prospective deficit of £11,000.

Three main reasons for this were: the large increase in energy prices, a drop in the number of weddings and a fall in planned giving. The PCC unanimously agreed to accept the Budget of 2024 as presented. The reserves policy was noted and accepted, but it understood that two successive years of deficits at this anticipated level would significantly endanger the Parish financial stability.

The PCC and the Finance Committee will need to work through a number of options to deal with the situation. A number of possibilities were raised and will need to be assessed in detail.

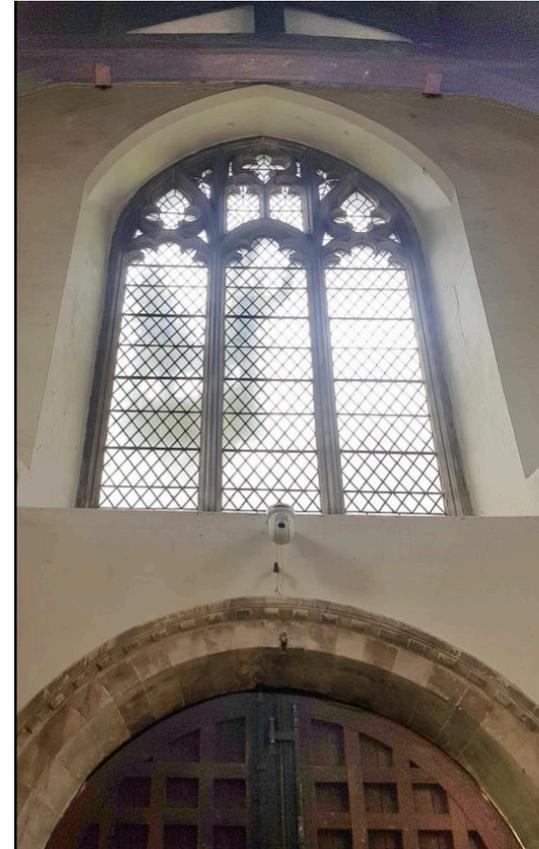
They included:

- A Stewardship Campaign
- A reduction of energy usage
- A reduction of staff costs
- The sale of St Mary's Hall and investment of proceeds to ensure a certain cash source.
- An increase in hire charges
- The subletting of St Mary's Hall to a management/marketing team.

The PCC recognised that it had the duty to bring these serious issues to the attention of parishioners so the subject should feature in the pending issue of SToMP, and PCC members have approved the inclusion of this statement.

However, we would welcome further suggestions from our congregations to enable us to raise additional funds or reduce our costs.

## WEIRDNESS AT THE WINDOW



Was it a bird? Was it a plane, or perhaps an unquiet spirit left over from hallowe'en?

On the morning of All Saints', St Mary's mid-week communion congregation were enjoying their post-service coffee and biscuits when they witnessed a strange apparition floating up and hovering beyond the window above the West door.

Double-takes all round! However there was a rational explanation. Neither avian nor aeronautic nor other-worldly; it was two workmen on a cherry picker cleaning the window panes after removing the old discoloured Lexan plastic covering and replacing it with a neat metal grille to protect the glass.

The project to replace the Lexan with metal grilles on all the windows has now been completed giving improved light transmission and a much better external appearance to the church's windows whilst protecting the precious glass from vandalism.



# RUNNING FOR LANGA KIDS

**TARGET SMASHED!**  
**£5,000+ raised**



Only 6 miles to go!

Grandson Fergus' mission, 'Running for Langa Kids' has been completed. He was one of a hundred running the 34 mile ultra marathon and finished 12th in a time of 6 hours 15 minutes.

The run was from sea level up and down steep slopes to heights of 1,200 feet with some slippery conditions. The weather was glorious, sunny throughout with temperatures from 3 to 10 C.

With some money still coming in £5012 has been donated by 160 supporters, a great result and circa £600 of this came from our Parish.

The target was £2,500 which is being distributed proportionately as the preschools vary in size from the smallest at 11 to the largest at 185. The money has been used to buy food vouchers to feed 3,000 children over a week towards Christmas. A small extra amount of ZAR 200( approximately £5) was added for each preschool and the rest is to be transferred into the fund being built up to provide the Langa Early Child Development Forum with a building, the target completion date April/May 2025

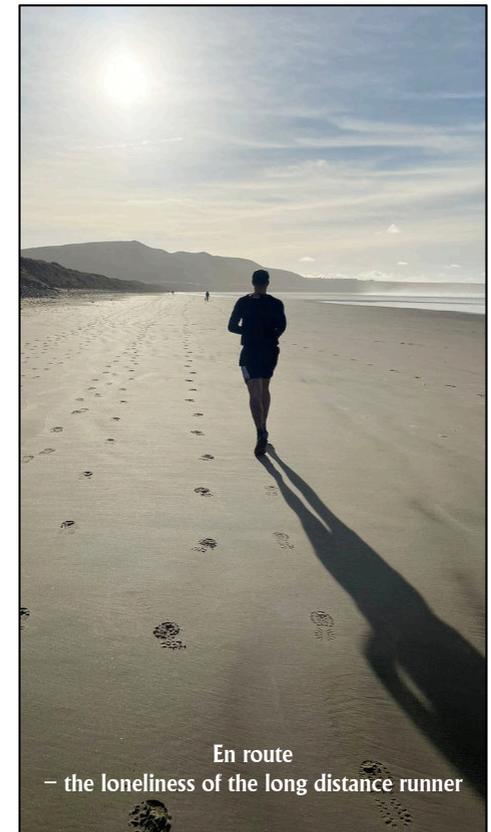
Regarding this new building, a lot of progress has been made through two of my new contacts, Chris Beech and Gary Clueit. During a two-hour ZOOM meeting on 20 October with me (Hemel Hempstead), Chris Beech (Cape Town) and Gary Clueit (Douglas, Isle of Man), the three of us (The Trio), together in mutual trust, with determination and working free of charge, intend to do whatever we can to achieve by May 2025 the official opening of a LECDF Centre.

We see it as our mission that this centre, as a demonstration project, will provide better opportunities for child development, for the empowerment of children and women, and sustainability.

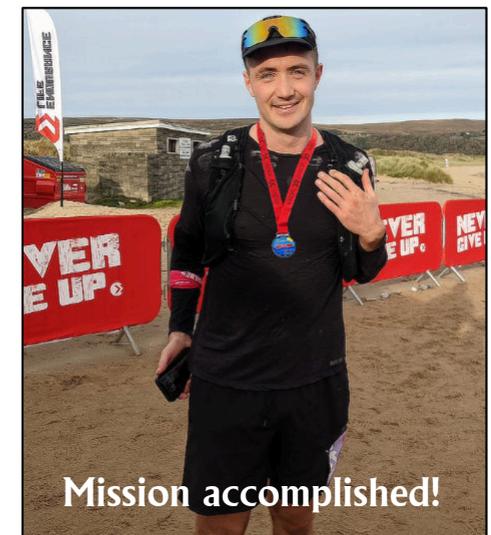
The financial sponsors of the project are:

- The UK Langa Township Pre-School Trust (including the Cheltenham College Partnerships, Charities and Community initiative. The Parish of St Mary and St Paul Hemel Hempstead and other sponsors) represented by Gordon Gaddes.
- The Clueit Foundation represented by Gary Clueit.

*Gordon Gaddes*



En route  
- the loneliness of the long distance runner



Mission accomplished!

## THE MINISTRY OF JUST BEING THERE



*Catherine Lindsay, a member of St Mary's congregation is a member of Dacorum Street Pastors. She was initially inspired to become involved because a cousin had already joined up, in a different area. Her cousin had written an article for her local parish magazine which Catherine thought gave an interesting insight into the work of Street Pastors and we have reproduced it here.*

Who are these people, darkly dressed, slowly walking the streets of local towns late at night? If you come closer you will see "Street Pastor" in large fluorescent letters across the back of their dark navy anorak or polo shirt, the front of their beanie or base ball cap, and on the rucksack or knapsack that they each carry.

Walk past and you may be greeted with "Hello, are you alright?" or "Are you having a good time?". They will stop and have a chat with the bouncers and doormen and women standing outside the pubs and clubs, they all know each other. "Is it quiet tonight?" "Are you expecting many punters?", "What time do you expect to close tonight?"

Typically a patrol starts at 9 or 10pm and comprises at least three or four people of which there should be at least one male and one female. On assembling, the bags are checked and allocated, the local CCTV and Police are phoned "Street Pastors here, we about to go out, is there anything we should be aware of?" There rarely is. Then contact is made with a Prayer Pastor, or anyone that the Pastors know who will be praying for them, and they all pray together for those they will encounter that night, that all may be kept safe, and that they may recognise need and respond appropriately.

A leader volunteers or is selected, bags are shouldered, and the group sets off. The bags contain bottles of water, flip-flop sandals (for drunk girls who are no longer able to walk in high heels and so may try to walk in bare feet), lollipops (these work wonders in a tense situation), one or two foil survival blankets, a dustpan and brush (to sweep up any broken glass), plastic bags (to pick up and dispose of discarded bottles and cans), "spikies" (plastic stoppers for bottles with a hole in for a straw, to prevent bottled drinks being "spiked"), a sharps canister (for needles or small knives), sick bags (taxi drivers appreciate this), a torch, a basic first aid kit, disposable gloves, tissues or wipes and anything else we think might come in useful. Each pastor carries a phone.

If three pastors comprise that night's patrol, they will walk together, if there are four, then they will walk in twos, maybe on each side of the road, but never out of sight of the other pair. If conversation starts up with a member of the public, only one pastor engages, the others stand back to avoid perceived intimidation. The patrol route taken varies, but will take in all open pubs and clubs. The railway station will also be visited once or twice during the patrol, particularly meeting the last train in each direction. No one is left on their own to wait to be picked up. If conversation is not appropriate, then the pastors will wait discreetly at a distance until they are satisfied that a safe way home or onward has occurred. ▷

It is not uncommon for pastors to be asked:

“Who are you? Are you like vicars?” “No, we come from a wide range of local Christian Churches”.

“What do you do?” “We are here to help make the streets safe at night”.

“Why do you do that?” “Because we care”.

“Are you part of the police?” “No, just members of the public” Having said that, pastors work closely with the police and are highly valued by them, but it is important that they are seen to be independent and non-judgmental. The uniform lends anonymity, but authority without threat.

“How much do you get paid?” “Nothing, we are volunteers.”

However half cut the interrogators are, this reply often elicits stunned silence, followed by “That is amazing! I really respect you for that. Did you hear that? Good on you. Thank you, I think you’re great. Can I shake your hand?” or sometimes “Can I give you a hug?” (A bit of judgement required here).

Pastors are not meant to proselytise, though they may be asked questions about religion or their faith, in which case they must reply honestly.

People who are not familiar with the way Street Pastors work often ask “Aren’t you scared?” to which the honest answer invariably is “No, never”. Pastors are trained in how to keep themselves safe, and constantly watch out for each other. If they encounter a situation which they are not confident that they can handle they must phone the police immediately. The door staff and bouncers also pledge “Any trouble and we will be right there for you”.

The ministry of the Street Pastors is not easily defined. It is very much a ministry of just “being there”, not doing anything obvious. The pattern of night life has changed greatly in recent years, it varies also from town to town. It is often boring for Pastors walking the streets with no one to interact with but themselves, yet revellers tell them that they appreciate their presence. Sometimes encounters or conversations do turn out to be of real significance, and as such are a source of encouragement that what Pastors do is of real worth.

Mention was made earlier of Prayer Pastors. This is a valuable addition to the ministry carried out on the streets. Anyone can volunteer to be a prayer pastor and to be added to the patrol rota for contact when the patrol sets out and undertakes to pray for them. Locally the number of Street Pastors and Prayer Pastors is reducing, so patrols are focussed on Friday, Saturday and Bank Holiday nights, and no one is required to do more than one patrol per month, though some do. Street Pastors can also be trained by the Samaritans to become Rail Pastors who are specially on the lookout for potential suicide cases on the railways.

Anyone interested in the work of the Street Pastors is welcome to come out with them as an observer. Should they wish to commit further, then they would receive basic training before being commissioned. Further training opportunities arise as trainers become available.



*A Street Pastor*

## OUR LADY OF WALSINGHAM



In 1061, the lady of the manor of Little Walsingham in Norfolk, a widow named Richeldis, prayed to our Lady asking how she could honour her in some special way. In answer to this prayer Mary led Richeldis in spirit to Nazareth and showed her the house in which she had first received the angel’s message. Mary told Richeldis to take the measurements of this house and build another one just like it in Walsingham. It would be a place where people could come to honour her and her Son, remembering especially the mystery of the Annunciation and Mary’s joyful ‘yes’ to conceiving the Saviour.

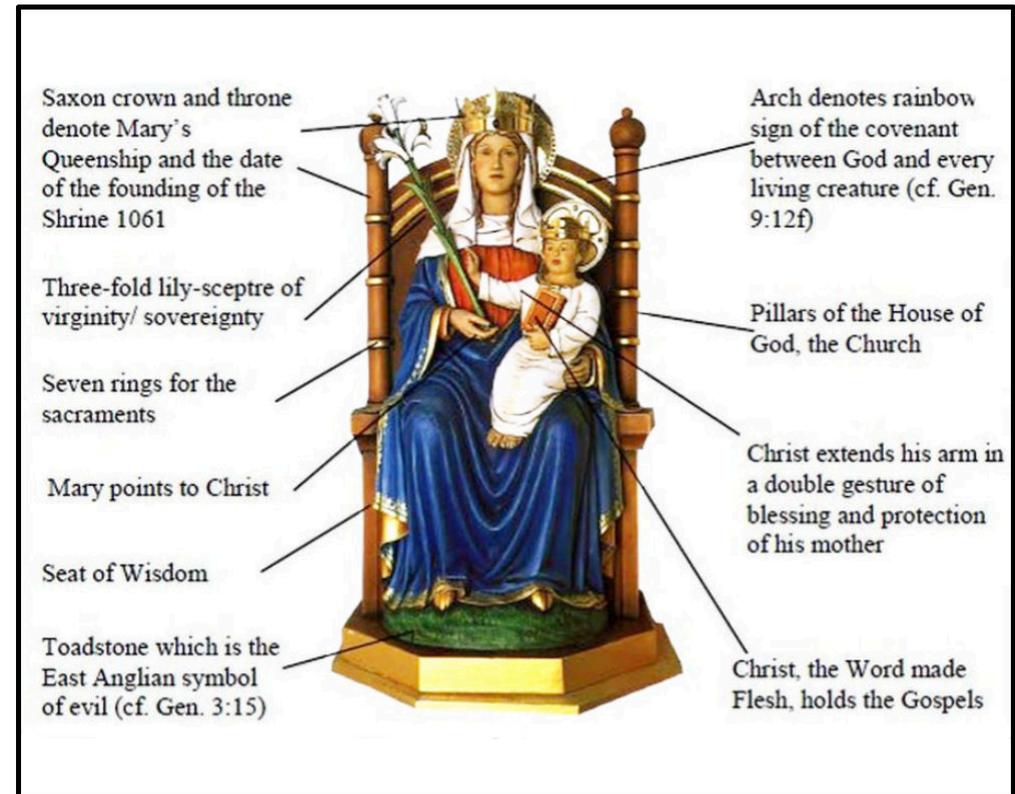
The late eleventh century and all through the twelfth and thirteenth century was the era of the crusades, which saw a growing interest in the sites consecrated by the human presence of Jesus in the Holy Land. But now pilgrims need not go so far; in England itself there was a ‘new Nazareth’ built by one of their own countrywomen. ▷

After some time Augustinian canons took over the care of the holy house and enshrined it in a special chapel within a much larger church. Pilgrims began to come from all over England and even abroad. From the time of Henry III nearly all the kings and queens of the realm visited Walsingham, as well as hundreds of ordinary people seeking help, healing and inner peace. Walsingham ranked with Rome, Jerusalem and Compostella in importance as a pilgrimage destination.

Erasmus, the Dutch scholar, visited Walsingham in 1513 and was impressed by the splendor of the Shrine. He wrote: 'There is a small chapel, which admits by a small narrow little door, on either side, those who come to salute our Layde ; the light is feeble, in fact scarcely any, excepting from wax candles. A most delightful fragrance gladdens one's nose.' Of the statue in the chapel he said: 'When you look in you would say it is the abode of saints, so brilliantly does it shine with gems, gold and silver ... Our Lady stands in the dark at the right side of the altar ... a little image, remarkable neither for its size, material or workmanship.'

However, the Shrine was destroyed at the time of the Reformation, and only rebuilt at the beginning of the twentieth century, mainly due to the inspired leadership of the Anglican vicar of Walsingham, Fr Hope Patten. He revived devotion to Our Lady under this title and built a new shrine Church and Holy House in the village, together with a statue modelled on that depicted on the ancient priory seal. It shows a seated Mary with her Son on her lap holding a book of the gospels.

Meanwhile a Miss Charlotte Boyd had purchased and restored the ancient Slipper Chapel a mile away and gifted it to the Catholic Church. This has since become the National Shrine of the Catholic Church in England. So Walsingham is a village dedicated to Mary, a place of ecumenical pilgrimage with a growing understanding of the original message of Walsingham as received by Richeldis.



The History of our statue is much shorter. The statue was given to the Anglican chaplaincy at HMP Wormwood Scrubs.

The Anglican chapel in Wormwood Scrubs later became a shared worship space for the Church of England and the Catholic communities at the Scrubs. This meant there were two Marian statues in the chapel; the Anglican chaplain very kindly offered to give one statue to the Hemel Ordinariate Mission at St Paul's as an expression of ecumenism that Our Lady has become for the Catholic and Anglican communities. Unfortunately at some time the statue of Our lady of Walsingham had become damaged and had lost her Lily sceptre. We intend/hope to raise money to restore the statue in the memory of Brian Cox who did so much for the Hemel Hempstead Ordinariate Mission and strongly supported of our move to St Paul's.

*Fr Neil - Hemel Ordinariate Mission*

# THE CHRISTMAS ROBIN

## A Story for Children

The little bobbing Robin  
Sat on my windowsill  
And looked at me with sadness  
As I lay in bed unwell  
And as it flapped its little wings  
To welcome Christmas Day  
It hopped upon my table  
To hear what I might say  
'Hello my friend, good cheer to you  
The snow has come at last  
And much as I would like to play  
My days of fun have past  
For my leg it is now broken  
Said the doctor with concern  
So rest I must for many weeks  
What a lesson to be learned'  
Then Robin gave a wink to me  
And flew around the room  
And everywhere he went, he chirped  
'Don't move, I'll be back soon'

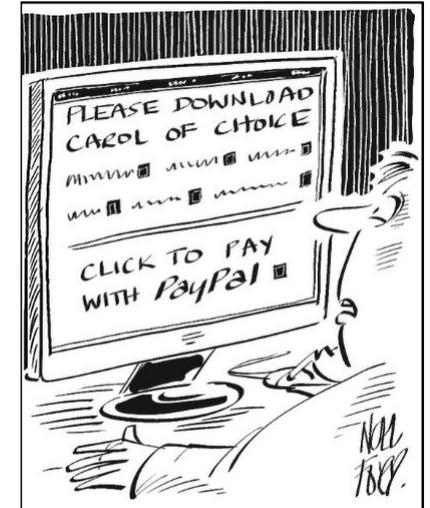
Then in a moment he was gone  
Through the window at great haste  
And way beyond the curtain  
He had picked up quite a pace  
But in the distant echoes  
The smell of embers burned  
As Winter's chill descended  
Robin suddenly returned  
And in his beak were tiny twigs  
Too small for me to see  
But back and forth he came and went  
To build a Christmas tree  
And bit by bit it slowly grew  
Taking shape where I did lay  
As I looked on in fondness  
At Robin's caring ways



And as a tear fell on my cheek  
His present now emerged  
With moss and fern to decorate  
The sound of music could be heard  
And with the ringing of the bells  
A distance cry was made  
As Robin flapped his wings once more  
To start his big parade  
For birds and animals countrywide  
Stood in the snow below  
To wish me a Merry Christmas  
And good tidings on the go  
The sparrows and the magpies  
The pigeons and the crows  
The foxes and the rabbits  
Deer leaping high and low  
The badgers and the drumming moles  
The squirrels marching bold  
As hawks kept watch across the ground  
The mice hid from the cold  
For Robin's friends had joined him  
On this very special day  
To put a smile upon my face  
And blow the sorrows away  
The gift of friendship they did make  
In the garden of my home  
Stirred up feelings of great happiness  
That I was loved and not alone  
And with this scene of wonderment  
And Robin's endearing ways  
A stocking full of magic  
Arrived for me on Christmas Day  
*Maura Kelly*



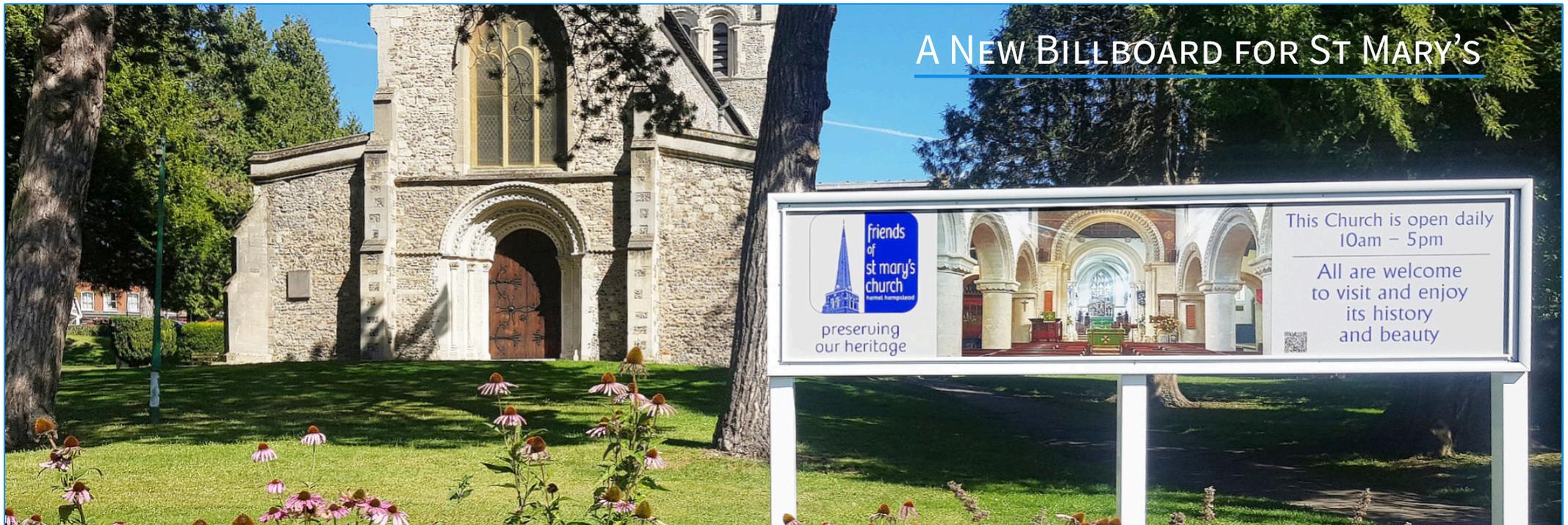
## RANDOM SMILES



*We've got online carol singers again*

Did Noah fish?  
A Sunday school teacher asked,  
"Johnny, do you think Noah did a lot  
of fishing when he was on the Ark?"  
"No," replied Johnny. "How could  
he, with just two worms?"

Thine  
A Yorkshireman wanted an  
inscription on his wife's grave to  
read: 'She was Thine'. The engraver  
mistakenly put 'She was Thin'. The  
man wrote to explain that they had  
left off the 'e'. The next attempt read:  
'E', She was Thin.'



# A NEW BILLBOARD FOR ST MARY'S

The Friends of St Mary's Church has installed a new billboard in the churchyard close to the foot/cycle path in Gadebridge Park. The picture above shows the 'basic' layout featuring the Friend's logo and strapline and a photograph of the church interior together with a message about the daily opening of the church and inviting people to visit. The QR code provides a link to the parish website.

The message can be easily changed by sliding an additional panel over the top. For example, we have a panel which publicises the monthly Old Town Market which we use during the last week in each month.

Panels featuring other events and appeals will appear from time to time.

The billboard was manufactured and printed by Lock67 Graphics Ltd in Apsley, the layout designed by Jeff Wallis.



*The installation of the billboard was carried out by (R - L) Robin Woodd, Mervyn Podmore, Brian Crawley, Roger Sygrave and Paul Stenning from Lock67 Graphics.*

## THE REVD IAN OGILVIE 1937-2023

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At St Mary's and St Paul's Churches we had the pleasure and privilege to meet Ian Ogilvie as he took several services in support of our clergy team. At St Paul's he took our Harvest Festival service in October and we were shocked when later we heard that he had passed away the following Wednesday. You, the readers of SToMP, know that I introduced the idea of the 'editorial interview' partly because attending funerals and memorial services leads us to know people better when they have passed away than when they are with us. This came to mind recently when Malcolm Taylor and I attended the memorial service for Ian Ogilvie at St Peter's Church, Tring. Happily, I have been sent the eulogy presented at that service which was given by Rev Canon Jane Banister on behalf of the family. To tell Ian's story in around a thousand words it is useful first to list just where he made his contributions over such a long and productive life.

Born on 10 May 1937, Ian was educated at Rossall School followed by reading at Emmanuel College, Cambridge for a Classics and English degree. A mark of the man to come is that he became President of the University Debating and Drama Societies. Vocational study at Lincoln Theological College was followed by curacies over six years at Clapham Parish Church and St Mary's Church Cambridge. His ministry then took an interesting turn when he became the first full time chaplain at Sevenoaks School 1967 to 1977. During this decade he became visiting chaplain for a year at St George's School in Newport Rhode Island. From 1977 to 1983 he was Chaplain at Malvern College, and he became Head Teacher of St George's School, Harpenden from 1983 to 1987. From 1987 to 1989 he was Chaplain to the Bishop of St Albans and Vicar of Aldenham. Then followed four years, two years working with MIND and two with the British Deaf Association and finally up to his retirement there were eleven years with the Royal Mission for Deep Sea Fishermen.

Ian's vocation over 44 years cannot be appreciated just through such a list of positions, but rather through some vignettes about his major achievements. At Sevenoaks he introduced 'O' Level Religious Studies, modern church music and he organised large events for young people. The latter in 1972 included an Open Air Eucharist in Trafalgar Square attended by 2000 people and broadcast on BBC1.



In the USA he preached at the White House Church. At home he had set up the Committee and raised money to build a Cheshire Home, which was opened by Sir Leonard himself in 1977. At Malvern he taught Religious Studies at 'O' and 'A' Levels and introduced Open Pulpit when famous people shared their faith with students. At St George's he encouraged Oxbridge entry, raised money for a new computer room and involving 50 parents started a programme to redecorate the school.

Then on to the Diocese of St Albans where he organised the visit of Archbishop Tutu, became the highly successful Chairman of the Church Urban Fund, his fund - raising talents then leading to senior posts in two charities, then on to his final decade of employment, supporting deep sea fishermen and their families.

He turned the finances of the Mission round dramatically, moving from a six figure deficit to a six figure surplus. During this period Ian, with his wife Jenny, were invited to Buckingham Palace and he received the MBE from Prince Charles. It is very appropriate now to quote from the letter of recommendation written about Ian by Lord Kinnoul, the Chairman of The Royal National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen. ▷



Ian with Jenny and his sons, Mark and Hugh at Buckingham Palace for the award of his MBE from (the then) Prince Charles

*He 'set out with great enthusiasm and energy to establish the Mission's fundraising ... applied himself tirelessly to successfully achieve a sound financial footing ... as a minister, he is endowed with remarkable ability to very effectively communicate at all levels ... a compassionate man who has a great love and affinity for British fishermen ..a consummate professional ... through his commitment and dedication, fishing communities can be assured in the future of very solid support'*

Retiring in 2005 at the age of 68 Ian Ogilvie did not give up, becoming a part time priest in the dioceses of St Albans and Oxford, for example during parish interregnums and maintaining an active yet 'a semi - detached role on the staff of the Tring Parish Team'. Involved with U3A and Probus, being president of the latter between 2019 and 2021. In London he was on the boards in of the YMCA and a homeless charity, the Simon Community.

Ian married Jenny in 1962 and they had two sons Mark (1966) and Hugh (1969). He was proud of Jenny, his loving and dedicated wife who gave him unwavering support over a 61 - year period. She and the family and the wide circle of friends will miss this wonderful man but he will always be with them. As for St Paul's we remember him for his lovely voice, his carriage and dignity, the directness of his gaze in presenting us with the eucharistic elements, his sensitive and well thought - through sermons, and his chatting with everyone when he came to us on several Sundays.

A life well lived and served. For all his achievements over such a long period Ian was a very modest man. Meeting a nosey Church Warden for Ian's first service at St Paul's, diffidently he said he had been a school chaplain! I learnt much more later on and now I am very happy to be able to share all this with you, the readers of STOMP.

## THE EVERLASTING TURKEY



On the first day of Christmas my true love said to me  
I've bought a big fresh turkey and a proper Christmas tree.

On the second day of Christmas much laughter could be heard  
As we tucked into our turkey – a most delicious bird.

On the third day of Christmas people came from just next door,  
The turkey tasted just as good as it had done before.

On the fourth day of Christmas came relations young and old  
We finished up the Christmas pud and had the turkey cold.

On the fifth day of Christmas, outside the snowflakes scurried,  
But we were nice and warm inside, and had the turkey curried.

On the sixth day of Christmas, the Christmas spirit died.  
The children fought and bickered – we had the turkey rissoles fried.

On the seventh day of Christmas my true love he did wince  
When he sat down at table – and was offered turkey mince.

On the eighth day of Christmas, the dog had run for shelter,  
For he'd seen our turkey pancakes and the glass of alka-seltzer.

On the ninth day of Christmas, by lunchtime dad was blotto,  
He knew that bird was back again, this time as a risotto.

On the tenth day of Christmas we were drinking home-made brew,  
Anything to help us face that steaming turkey stew.

On the eleventh day of Christmas our lovely tree was moulting,  
And with chilli, soy and oyster sauce, the turkey was revolting.

On the twelfth day of Christmas we had smiles back on our lips,  
The guests had gone, the turkey too – WE DINED ON FISH AND CHIPS.

# GOD IN THE SCIENCES



*This series is written by Dr Ruth M Bancewicz, who is Church Engagement Director at The Faraday Institute for Science and Religion in Cambridge. Ruth writes on the positive relationship between Science and Christian faith.*

## Follow the Star

Jesus' welcoming committee included Eastern scholars who learned about His birth through their study of astrology. I can't help thinking that the arrival of these people at Bethlehem is a link between a very early form of science (albeit mixed in with their own form of religion) and Christian faith. What better way to discover God than to explore the world and follow the evidence wherever it leads? But what exactly was the star of Bethlehem? Scientists have investigated this question over the centuries, coming up with a variety of answers.

First, there is the idea of a supernova: the massively bright explosion caused by a dying star. On rare occasions a supernova can be seen from Earth with the naked eye, remaining visible for several months. We now know that Herod the Great died around 4BC, so the actual date of Jesus' birth must be a little earlier. The supernovae that might match this timing were one in the Andromeda galaxy between March 8BC and September 7BC, and another in the constellation of Capricorn in the Spring of 5BC.

Next, comes a planetary conjunction. The alignment most commonly associated with the star of Bethlehem was between Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of Pisces in 7BC, but not everyone is sure whether this would be extraordinary enough to be the 'star' mentioned in the Bible.

Finally, the bright astronomical object that drew the Magi could have been a comet. This idea came from Sir Colin Humphreys, Professor of Materials Science at Cambridge University, and Oxford astronomer WG Waddington, who found that a comet was recorded by Chinese astronomers between March and May, 5BC. Humphreys then speculated that the 'no room at the inn' scenario came about because Jesus was born during Passover, and the Magi visited Jesus in May or June.

People interpret the biblical account of Jesus' birth in all sorts of ways, but there's very little argument from serious historians that Jesus of Nazareth actually existed. Whatever the true explanation for the 'star of Bethlehem' may be, there's plenty of evidence that an astronomical event could have happened at the time of His birth.

I think it makes perfect sense that if God was going to enter His own creation and take on the form of one of His own creatures, it should be marked by a very significant physical event!

## HOW FATHER CHRISTMAS

One person you are bound to run into this Christmas season is Father Christmas. These days he seems to frequent shopping malls and garden centres. If he looks tired, just remember that he has been around a long time and gone through a lot of transformations.

Father Christmas wasn't always the red-suited, white-bearded star of the retail trade that he is today. He began life as Nicholas, born way back about AD260 in Patara, an important port on the southern coast of what is now Turkey. When his parents died and left him a fortune, Nicholas gave it away to the poor. He became a bishop of the nearby city of Myra, where he almost certainly suffered persecution and imprisonment at the hand of the Roman Emperor Diocletian.

Nicholas was a serious theologian: he was a participant at the First Council of Nicaea, which formulated the Creed which we still say today. He even, reportedly, slapped another bishop in a squabble over the exact nature of the Trinity.

Nicholas died in Myra about AD343, but the stories of his generosity and kindness were just beginning. One enduring tale tells of the three girls whom he rescued from certain prostitution by giving them gold for their dowries. When the father confronted him to thank him, Nicholas said he should thank God alone.

In the UK, Nicholas became the basis for Father Christmas, who emerged in Victorian times as a jolly-faced bearded character.

It was in America that Nicholas received his final two great breaks into real stardom. The first was when the Rev Clement C Moore, a New York Episcopal minister, turned from his life-work of writing a Hebrew/English lexicon, to write a fun poem for his children one Christmas. His 'The Visit of St Nicholas' is now universally known by its first line: 'T'was the Night Before Christmas'.

From Clement Moore we discovered that St Nicholas is round and pink-cheeked and white-bearded, and that he travels at night with sleigh, reindeer and a sack of toys on his back. It was Clement Moore who also revealed that St Nicholas enters houses down chimneys and fills children's stockings with toys and sweets.

## GOT WHERE HE IS TODAY

So how did we find out that Father Christmas wears red? That was the US Coca-Cola advertising campaign of 1931, who finally released the latest, up-to-date pictures of Father Christmas: wearing a bright red, fur-trimmed coat and a large belt.

These days, it is good that Father Christmas uses reindeer and doesn't have to pay for petrol. In order to get round all the children in the world on Christmas Eve, he will have to travel 221 million miles at an average speed of 1279 miles a second, 6,395 times the speed of sound.

For all those of us who are already exhausted just rushing around getting ready for Christmas, that is a sobering thought.

*Parish Pump  
Editorial -- Holy  
Days in  
December*





A joyful and peaceful Christmastide  
to all our readers  
from the SToMP editorial team

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