

The Parish of Sedlescombe with Whatlington

St. Mary Magdalene Church, Whatlington

Report for Annual Parish Assembly 2024

Overview

The church maintains an online presence through the Whatlington page on the Church of England website 'a church near you'. This consistently records quite a high number of 'hits' or visits, this interest aligns with our commitment to growing church attendance and welcoming, not only practising Christians, but all who may doubt but seek. The church also has its own Facebook page which, whilst less frequently visited does promote our services and is something we are trying to grow.

The initiative of opening the church on Sundays and Wednesdays has proved a success and we would like to be able to extend this, but it does mean that someone has to be available to open up and close the church.

The contactless giving device which the church has been able to acquire in 2021 from the diocese has proved to be a worthwhile addition and attracts regular giving.

For most of the past year the church remained in what is termed an Interregnum, in lay terms without our own appointed priest. Church service cover was arranged by the Churchwardens and given by Revd. Stephanie Prosser and Revd. John Hawkins respectively.

We maintained all the usual services through the year, with some special Songs of Praise services substituted where clergy cover was not possible. All services were well attended with the congregation staying stable and actually showing some small growth. The 'Hymns and Pimms' service at the end of August offers something different and was again held in the churchyard.

Having gone through the process of advertising in the Church Times three times and with no applications thought worth further consideration, in September the diocese decided to make a change to the terms of the position. The description of Priest-in-Charge, which was being advertised for the Parish of Sedlescombe with Whatlington changed to that of Rector. This change to Rector, reverts to the historical title for the post as used at both Sedlescombe and Whatlington. This change means that the post holds greater security of tenure and importantly that applicants could live in their own home and not in the Rectory, provided that they lived within easy distance of both churches.

It was hoped that in making these changes the vacancy might have a wider appeal and so we were very fortunate that they led Revd. John Hawkins to apply. After going through the usual application/interview process we were happy to appoint John, with the formal licensing by the Bishop of Lewes taking place last December.

With John having taken services stretching back to before Kevin Mepham's retirement, his appointment has given the church some welcome continuity.

Christmas services were, as usual well attended, the Christmas Pageant was based in the church due to the usual venue being unavailable as its owners were away.

In February we held a special service to mark the 10th anniversary of the re-opening of the church after the post fire restoration and everyone commented how quickly those ten years have passed.

Church Fabric

We have previously had the tie beam at the juncture of the Nave and Chancel sprayed to kill death watch beetle. At that time it had been hoped that we could replace what was clearly a 'well eaten' beam. Unfortunately various heritage bodies, including SPAB and Historic England opposed replacement. Fast forward to 2023 and the infestation was manifesting itself again, presumably with the beetles have lain dormant deep inside the timber. The presence of wood dust was the tell tale sign.

Our architect was asked for and gave his opinion and confirmed what we suspected. Quotes were obtained from our builders to treat the infestation using a Boron paste, brushed on and it was agreed that a start date in the new year would be the best option.

The work to treat the wood beetles is an expensive exercise, a full scaffold platform has had to be erected in the main body of the church, the Nave. This was necessary to gain safe and effective access to apply the paste onto every exposed timber. With the scaffold in place it became obvious that the ancient tie beam, spanning the walls at the juncture of the Nave and Chancel was more severely damaged than had been thought. This was so bad that it could be quite easily moved in situ and was cracked through at one end. Whilst replacement was the obvious and necessary course, we had to

gain permission from the church authorities, who manage work on Listed church buildings. This is done through a derogated planning system and just like local authority planning there is a fee attached, £198 in this case. The urgency of the work meant that it was not considered necessary to further consult the heritage bodies.

In order to replace the tie beam further scaffolding was necessary, this to be erected in the Chancel, both for access to replace the beam and to afford access to apply the boron paste to the Chancel timbers, which had not originally been thought to be necessary. The void along the top of the roof has also had to be treated and as can be imagined this whole process has made a huge dent, some £14,000 in the churches reserves. Some serious fund raising is now required to try and replenish this. We have only been able to afford this work thanks to being able to use funds from a generous bequest, but this does serve to show just how expensive it is to maintain a Grade II* Listed medieval church building.

On top of this, it seemed sensible to ask the builders to inspect the condition of the bell frame and the timber structure of the spire, this has revealed the fact that the infestation has spread, both into the 16th century bell frame and the 19th century spire frame. The estimate to treat these additional timbers in around £3600, access is, to say the least awkward

With fund raising partly in mind, we have our Spring Fair at the village hall on Saturday 27th April, where we hope to see a good support from local people.

Churchyard:

The churchyard is maintained using a mixture of paid and volunteer labour, there is always plenty to do to keep everything tidy. We draw peoples attention to the Churchyard Regulations posted at the church, these set out various conditions associated with the churchyard. We are grateful to the Parish Council for their grant towards the cost of grass cutting. In the past year part of the perimeter fence has been replaced and we are mindful that the paving slabs in the Garden of Remembrance are becoming uneven and will need to be reset at some point when funds allow. We have had two interments of ashes in early 2024 and draw peoples attention to the fact that there are some clear Church of England regulations concerning memorial tablets and indeed headstones for burials.

Conclusion:

As always there remains an ongoing list of work which needs to be done in order to maintain the building. We pay for an annual clean and check of the gutters, roof tiles and valleys, this costs around £350 but is worthwhile as preventative maintenance.

Although at a national level the Church of England may seem to have plenty of money, unfortunately the powers that be do not let any of this filter down to help maintain the country's heritage of Listed ancient church buildings and the task is left to the Rector, Churchwardens and Parochial Church Council to manage as best we can.

Next year will mark the 750th anniversary of the present church in Whatlington, though some of the fabric may be older still and we strive to ensure that the church remains relevant and well cared for during our period as custodians.

It is hoped we may be able to restart church services on Sunday 17th March and we shall certainly be up and running for our Easter services, where we hope to see good local support, particularly for the 10.30 service on Easter Day.