

The Rector's Benefice Report 2019

We began the year by saying farewell and thank you to Lorna and Peter Allies. Their legacy includes the *Friends of Wickhampton Church*, which took formal shape during the year; and the toilet at Freethorpe, dedicated by Bishop Alan on his visitation in February. That facility has enabled increased use of the church, notably a monthly drop-in, *Coffee, Cake and Chat*.

The House for Duty post at Reedham was to remain vacant for the whole of the year: I'm grateful to everybody within the Benefice who has helped make that manageable; and to visiting clergy. The Sunday load has been shared by our own Readers and Authorised Worship Assistants; it was wonderful to be able to prepare two more AWAs at Limpenhoe in Simon Ash and Sarah Mules. Their desire to grow the church was evidenced in the increasingly successful additional services they conducted through Advent. Prior to this Simon needed to be Confirmed, joining Simon Pittam and the rest of the innovative Deanery Confirmation Preparation group.

Sadly numbers of Baptisms dropped, with only one at Acle and 6 in the Benefice as a whole (one of them at Tunstall, thanks to the arrival of Robin More). So did weddings (3: all at Acle); although this ministry is still worth celebrating, with one couple particularly appreciating the welcome they experienced on Sundays at St. Edmund's; and two renewals of wedding vows during the year – one of them Freethorpe's Australian friends.

The number of funerals conducted at crematoria or cemeteries (7) also continued to fall, as civil celebrants take an increasing share. The resultant drop in fee income is worryingly affecting finances at both parish and diocesan level; against that background, the fact that in 2019 we still managed to pay 95% demonstrates the Benefice commitment to Parish Share.

Against the national trend, the number of funerals in church held up (22). That is partly due to our open churchyards (thank you to those who oversee and maintain them); but it's clearly an aspect of our ministry which is valued within our communities. Every death is significant; among those of more than local impact were the loss of retired Reader Peter Trueman; *Mother's Union* stalwart Jean Cunnington; retired funeral director Tony Moll and Dr. Nick Ireland.

On a brighter sacramental note our Benefice (or its predecessor) did have a hand in an ordination: that of James Gilder, resulting in a joyful visit to Chelmsford Cathedral.

Our church bells (including Acle and Halvergate) sounded more frequently during the year, with the continuing revival of *Reedham Ringers*. Towards the end of the year they celebrated their first anniversary; but also marked the passing of a former tower captain, Peter Luckins.

Compared with 2018, Sunday congregation numbers appear stable. Working with children in the Church is often an up-and-down experience: *Reedham Chill Church* had variable numbers through the year; but a particular highlight was the visit to Norwich Cathedral and its helter-skelter installation. The experiment of holding a floating, monthly evening service in the Benefice didn't justify making this a permanent feature. The most successful of these slots was taken by the Benefice Choir's Easter celebration, *Thy Lord is Risen*. The Choir also took up an invitation to sing Evensong at Norwich Cathedral; and for Halvergate's *Book of Common Prayer Day*, marking its continuing contribution to Anglican worship in and beyond our Benefice.

We continue to strengthen our ecumenical links. Reedham hosted the July service for what is now to be known as *Freethorpe & Area Churches Together* (that's a FACT). This celebrated the national anniversary of *Open the Book*, which continues in three of our Primary Schools (although new team members would be welcome). We said farewell to Steve Cullis and welcomed a new local Methodist Minister in Andrew King. Members of St. Edmund's joined Acle Methodists for their Covenant Service (relocated to the Recreation Centre by building work at the church); on Good Friday and for occasional *Just Desserts* (conversation with calories).

Building work also impacted some of our congregations during the year. Most significantly, Beighton's superb fundraising efforts successfully gave way in July to the start of work on their *Rethatching & Improvements Project* (now not programmed to end until September 2021). Much smaller in scale (though, frustratingly, equally long-lasting) Acle's underground heating boiler was replaced with a new one in a purpose-built cabinet. Funded by the Parish Council, Acle's clock mechanism was renewed; and Halvergate's crumbling plasterwork was attended to. Thank you to Fabric Officers and Churchwardens for their care of our places of worship.

The Church of England managed to find another Bishop Graham to fill the vacancy in see; some church members were able to meet him when he visited the Deanery within a week of his enthronement. I think he's finding the Diocese to be in good heart; as is our Benefice.

Martin Greenland