



## **Cowley St John: Parish Profile**

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## View from the Bishop of Oxford

Bartlemas Chapel is one of the holy places in Oxford, a thin place where earth and heaven meet: a mediaeval church originally outside the city walls; a place of prayer for the hospital and leper community and now a place of prayer and retreat. The new priest for Cowley St John (CSJ) will need to nurture and be nurtured by this still centre of contemplative prayer and healing. The quietness of St Bartholomew's is a wellspring of renewal and in contrast with the busyness, variety and complexity of the wider parish where town meets gown; East Oxford meets the city centre and different faith communities live and flourish side by side. There is an excellent foundation in church and community life on which the new Vicar can build with key decisions taken about the renewal of church buildings and the drawing together of the different congregations. We are seeking a parish priest with the capacity to dwell deeply in the life of God and offer compassionate, faithful witness within this diverse



community. We would value a priest with a desire to build strong relationships with the Muslim communities of East Oxford and to be able to offer some wider expertise in the city. It will be important to build up the life, strength and diversity of the congregation in many different ways. There will be many different opportunities to serve but each will flow from a deep rootedness in Christ in prayer, Scripture and sacrament and providing places of rest within East Oxford, part of this the great international cultural crossroads in our city. Be assured you will be part of a supportive deanery and diocese as Vicar of CSJ.



*Steven Croft*

The Rt Revd Dr Steven Croft  
Bishop of Oxford

# View from the Area Dean

Thank you for looking at this parish profile.

The Parish of Cowley St John (CSJ) is key within the Deanery of Cowley. Cowley Deanery serves Oxford City to the East of the River Cherwell. It includes areas of wealth alongside some the most financially, and socially, challenged communities in the diocese of Oxford. There are parishes of 'Presence and Engagement', alongside academia and the industry that is at the heart of Oxford City economy. The parish serves a diverse community. Within the parish there are key representative buildings of other faith groups and many of the organisations that serve this beautiful community. The parish is key in supporting the mission of the Church across the whole of East Oxford, and, over recent years, has taken a gentle lead in interfaith matters.

CSJ is a loving and dedicated community seeking to find the very best in leadership. They are looking for a Priest to lead their dedicated church family and to take them through a time of change. They have loved and supported their previous leaders. There is a strong team of lay and ordained people who work well together.

CSJ is part of the Cowley Deanery, a supportive and innovative family. Chapter meets monthly and provides collegiality, and a place for discussion and reflection. Although theologically diverse, and serving a great variety of needs, we are very much a caring 'Team', where support and friendship can be found.

Having had an extended period of stability, the deanery is moving into a phase of change and discovery. It is a time when some pastoral reorganisation is occurring, but more importantly, where we see neighbouring parishes as colleagues working to build the Kingdom of God. Cowley, alongside other deaneries in the diocese, is working to prioritise and strengthen the relationships between Church, Schools and Home. The parish of CSJ is fertile soil where good relationships have already been established. There are open doors for this work to develop. As we move forward, we are looking to establish structures that are 'light-footed' enough to resource church growth, whilst increasingly calling out, commissioning and honing the gifts of all believers. It is hoped that the new incumbent of CSJ will be able to share their experience and vision as we continue this journey.

This is an exciting post for a vibrant Priest to lead a dedicated part of the family Christ in the service of their local community. I encourage you to consider the possibility that God is calling you to this role. We need a passionate gifted, and Spirit-filled leader to journey with us. Do please feel free to contact me if you have any further questions. Tel 07759 393023.



Revd Canon Dr Geoff Bayliss  
Area Dean, Cowley

# Introduction

*Christ at our Heart*

I am among you as one who serves (Luke 22:27)



The purpose of every Church of England parish church is 'worship and mission'. This has been our ideal and practice since the foundation of the Parish of Cowley St John on the Cowley Road in 1875. Today, we are a vibrant, diverse, and inclusive community in the heart of East Oxford. Our worship is in the liberal Anglo-Catholic tradition, having a strong liturgical and musical tradition as well as a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere. Inspired by our history, the parish seeks to gather a people of prayer and sincerity, fostering a spiritual community. Members both contribute to and are sustained by liturgy, music, and the sacraments, ecological activities based around St Mary and St John Churchyard, and proactive engagement in the local community.

[The Cowley St John \(CSJ\) parish](#) consists of three churches:

- St Mary and St John (SMJ/Mary and John) – situated on the bustling Cowley Road, our parish church
- St Alban's (SA/Alban's) – situated on one of East Oxford's quieter side streets
- Bartlemas Chapel – a beautiful mediaeval chapel with no congregation; used for monthly evensongs and occasional services

These are the constituent worshipping parts of the single parish, with one incumbent (a vicar), two churchwardens (traditionally one each from SMJ and SA), and a Parochial Church Council (PCC) comprising members from both churches. SMJ and SA were founded at the height of the popularity and influence of the Anglo-Catholic revival in the Church of England, and present worship continues in a modern catholic tradition. Scripture, sacrament, the celebration of the Eucharist and the Daily Office are at the heart of all we do, nurturing our sense of community and commitment to social justice.

We are now looking for a priest with a God-given love for all people, who will, by example and leadership, draw us together to strengthen our life of worship and our wish to bear yet richer fruits of hospitality and service.

## Background and vision

Father Richard Benson, our founder, was both a visionary and a Victorian. When he came to East Oxford, it was to be vicar of what was then a new and fast-growing community. We live in very different times, but while the place of the church in the community has changed radically, we believe that Benson's vision of the local church as a place that offers daily prayer and worship whilst working with those on the margins has not changed. Benson sought to be part of a Christian community that through worship and in community action shared a vision of the Kingdom of God as a place where all can find a home.

This is something that has consistently been at the forefront of parish-wide conversations about our future. The last ten years have presented challenges that have caused us to pause and reflect on how best to sustain our worshipping community and serve the wider community in East Oxford. SMJ and SA are still very much local parish churches, serving the local area, with the majority of those on our electoral roll living within the parish boundaries. Our congregations are incredibly diverse and represent a variety of life experiences and denominational backgrounds. At Christmas we are also an important part of local festivities; for example, our Christmas Eve Crib Service attracts approximately 200 people.



However, weekly attendance at both churches has not fully recovered following the pandemic. SMJ averages 60 adults and 5 children each week. SA averages around 20 people, including teenagers and young children. SMJ as a building is also in need of significant refurbishment to enable it to be the spiritual and community hub we envision.

We are excited by the potential to increase regular community engagement in the worshipping life of the parish as well as our capacity for social justice and community outreach. Our hope is that this project, outlined below, will enable us to better serve God in East Oxford.

After much prayer, discussion, and consultation amongst our congregations and with key stakeholders in the wider community, in 2022 the PCC approved plans for a reordered parish and renewed SMJ. We

have made considerable progress both in terms of articulating and agreeing on our vision and in practical steps taken, as detailed in Appendix 1 below. With support from the Oxford Diocese's Parish Development Officer, the PCC recently resolved to instruct the parish architect to proceed with final plans for the renovation of SMJ, for submission to the DAC for the relevant faculties.

However, the focus has not simply been on how to renew SMJ as a building, but on how to reshape the parish so that it can meet the worshipping needs of the parish sustainably. While both SMJ and SA have deeply committed congregations and a slightly different approach, we recognise that there are exciting opportunities for all of us to come together as one congregation. On balance, given financial pressures, variables like future clergy provision, the size of the two congregations, and the obvious advantages of pooling our resources for worship, ministry, and service to the community, the PCC on 8 November 2022 passed, by a more-than-75% majority (11 in favour, 1 abstain, 1 against), a resolution unite the two congregations at SA during the refurbishment of SMJ, and upon its completion to occupy SMJ as one congregation. This will require prayerful and considerate leadership during a significant change from someone who will cherish and hold the diversity of our church community including our distinctive expressions and worship patterns.

## Who we are



As we look to the future and prepare to welcome a new incumbent, we also prayerfully reflect on who we are and where we hope to grow as a united community.

Our values and priorities:

- I. **Worship that is rooted in our historic Anglo-Catholic heritage**, with the celebration of the Eucharist and the Daily Office at the heart of all we do.

2. **Building a unified worshipping community.** While always a priority for us, this presents both a unique opportunity and a challenge for us as we pursue our parish reordering project and unite our two congregations.
3. **Encouraging the next generation.** We seek to encourage spirituality and Church involvement in the youth and children in our parish.
4. **Enhancing our visible presence in the East Oxford community.** Community and social action have always been at the heart of who we are as a parish, and we want to build on current successes, which include Alice's Tea Party (our fortnightly social space for adults with mental health needs), Little Lights (our infant and toddler carers group), a partnership with Oxford Mutual Aid, and the recently formed Oxford branch of Citizens UK. We hope that the refurbished SMJ will move us closer toward our Eco-Church commitments, become a useful community hub, and that its churchyard will become more welcoming and safer for our neighbours and for outreach and education.
5. **Welcoming and engaging students and academics.** We are ideally situated between Oxford Brookes University and the University of Oxford. We hope to provide the many students and researchers who find themselves in Oxford with a meaningful and inclusive space in which to explore, develop, and share their faith.
6. **Enhancing spiritual growth and discipleship.** We seek to enhance opportunities for parishioners to deepen their understanding of the Christian faith and other faiths through sharing, interfaith dialogue, the Daily Office, discipleship courses, Bible study, and supplementary forms of worship.

## What we are looking for

Our new vicar will join our vibrant and welcoming parish at an exciting moment of change and development. They will teach the faith of Scripture, the creeds, and the sacraments in ways that can speak to a wide range of educational levels and experiences of the church. They will preside over the liturgy with confidence and with a sensitive respect that is characterised by openness, humility, and dignity. They will also need to lead, shape, and deliver our reordering project and all that it entails, including sharing in our journey of becoming a unified worshipping community. Most importantly, our new incumbent will model a God-given love for all people.

While no person can be an exact match for every attribute listed, below are some of the key values, skills, and characteristics that we seek in our new vicar.

### Faith and values

- Attuned to Christian liturgy
- Scripturally aware and engaged
- Formed in the liberal Anglo-Catholic tradition
- Committed to social justice and interfaith partnership
- Committed to advancement in both the Inclusive Church network and the Living in Love and Faith journey
- Committed to the development of faith amongst children and young people in the parish

## Leadership and management skills

- Enthusiasm for and experience with large-scale capital projects (demonstrable experience from previous posts is desirable)
- Ability to inspire and empower
- Organised and able to manage a team - a savvy delegator
- Collaborative
- Skilled communicator
- Financially literate

## Personal qualities

- A visible pastoral presence in the community
- A good sense of humour
- Approachable and friendly
- Relaxed and informal
- Humble and realistic

## Your life at Cowley St John

We look forward to supporting our new vicar and enabling them to thrive in their new life in our parish. We value work-life balance and encourage our vicar to take their full holiday leave and to take an annual retreat. We also support the pursuit of other activities that will enable rest and reflection and enrich spiritual life and personal wellbeing. We are also committed to paying our incumbent's work-related expenses.

## A supportive team

Our new vicar will join a supportive leadership team comprising two deeply committed churchwardens, a collaborative and friendly PCC, several active associate clergy members, and a skilled part-time financial administrator. They will find that we are a close-knit community and actively support one another in our life and work.

The PCC meets regularly, at least 6 times a year, and is representative of the two congregations, with a wide range of skills and experiences. In addition to the PCC, we also have a Project Committee, chaired by a PCC member, which steers and reports on the Parish Reordering Project.

As well as a committed PCC, the parish is sustained by a group of dedicated volunteers who support the running of services and wider parish life, including, but not limited to, reading, providing tea/coffee, and arranging flowers.

CSJ often hosts ordinands on placement from [St Stephen's House](#) and [Ripon College Cuddesdon](#). Students are encouraged to become full members of our church community while

they are with us. This presents an opportunity for our vicar to provide valuable mentorship to future priests whilst benefiting from additional support in our worship and parish life.

In an annual joint service, we celebrate Candlemas at St Stephen's House, who traditionally host us for an evening meal after the service. They also join us regularly for our Palm Sunday service where we process from SA to SMJ accompanied by the [Oxford Silver Band](#).

## Who will be working with you?

- Revd Sabina Alkire: Sabina assists regularly with Sunday worship and lives locally. She is the Director of the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative.
- Revd David Gimson (SSM): David is a part-time curate in training, working Wednesdays and Sundays; he will be priested in late June. He has been heavily involved in the development of Laudate and Laudate Eucharist services at St Albans. He is also a teacher at Cheney School.
- Revd Susannah Reide: Susannah is one of our Associate Priests, licensed to the parish. She is also part of the St Alban's choir and has been involved in leading Bible study groups.
- Petronella Spivey (LLM): Petronella assists regularly with Sunday ministry in the parish, particularly at St Alban's. She has also been involved in leading Bible study groups and our Camino course.
- Rosy Hancock (Warden): Rosy is a long-standing member of the congregation, and an enthusiastic participant in the choir at SMJ.
- Chloe Robinson (Warden): Chloe grew up in the parish and is a committed member of St Alban's choir. She initially joined the PCC to represent the congregation at St Albans.
- Rodney Burr: Rodney is a member of the PCC and is also on the Standing Committee. He is our premises manager.
- Richard Dunkerley: Richard is a member of the PCC and our treasurer.
- Hannah Hempstead: PCC Secretary
- Peter McCullough: Peter is a member of the PCC and chairs our Reordering Project Committee. He has been instrumental in getting the project at SMJ in motion, including liaising with the parish architect.
- Verona Harris: Verona is the sacristan at St Mary and St John.
- Kirsty James: Kirsty worships at SMJ where she leads our serving team and is assistant sacristan.
- Susanna Gimson - Susanna coordinates the music at St Albans.
- Lawrence Tao and Alex Tester: Lawrence and Alex are our joint Directors of Music, based at St Mary and St John, with overall responsibility for the musical life of the parish.
- Maria Sweeney: Properties Administrator
- Maureen Thomas: Maureen provides part-time support with financial admin within the parish.

## The vicarage



The vicarage is a modern four-bedroom detached family home in mature secluded gardens set back from the Cowley Road. It is a short walk from SMJ and SA and the bustle of Cowley Road while also being close to the tranquillity of Bartlemas Chapel. The study/office is next to the front entrance of the property, enabling separation between work and home life.



On the ground floor of the main body of the house, there is a large sitting room with French doors that open onto the back garden and a spacious kitchen/diner. Off the kitchen is a utility room with doors leading into the garden and garage. There is also a downstairs toilet.

On the first floor, there are four bedrooms, two of which are double, and a bathroom and separate toilet.

In front of the house is a large garden laid to lawn and at the rear is also a good-sized garden, mainly lawn with some mature trees. There is ample off-road parking next to the garage.

## Our worshipping life

### Our worshipping community

One of the things that we are most thankful for is the diversity of people who we consider to be part of our parish family. We have a broad range of people from different backgrounds, ages, and life experiences, including those who might often be considered as being on the margins. Everyone is welcome and we are keen that ‘no one feels less here’, as one parishioner so perfectly put it. Through challenging times, we come together to support each other and listen, whether this be over personal circumstances or grappling with the difficulty of the pandemic or recent global conflicts.

We are a member of the Inclusive Church network and hold to its statement of belief: “We believe in inclusive Church - church which does not discriminate, on any level, on grounds of economic power, gender, mental health, physical ability, race, or sexuality. We believe in a Church which welcomes and serves all people in the name of Jesus Christ.” We continue to engage in the Living in Love and Faith journey ongoing within the Church of England. Our parish is committed to using the Prayers of Love and Faith in blessing same-sex couples and continues to promote and implement further inclusive measures flowing from the ongoing Living in Love and Faith journey.

Since the pandemic, we have increasingly sought to spend time together as a community outside of services through social events. For example, we had a very well-attended picnic in the summer and a lively dinner party in SMJ including guest musicians and dancing. In the past, we have had regular fish and chip nights, talent shows, movie nights, and bring-and-share dinners.



### Youth ministry

We are enthusiastic about developing our work with children and young people so that their spiritual lives and faith are nourished as they grow. Both SMJ and SA have children’s areas within

the body of the church where activities are often set up alongside books and toys; these areas are predominantly used by our families with toddlers and primary-aged children. Children are also invited to come closer to the sanctuary during the Eucharistic prayer so that they can see what is happening. There are also 'break out' spaces for families if a quieter space is needed during the service.



As well as younger children, we also have a group of teenagers who attend regularly. Many of them previously attended our Sunday School each week but outgrew this provision. In both churches they are actively involved in worship through serving, reading, and helping to plan and lead some Laudate services at SA. Some of our teenagers also help with tea and coffee after services.

While neither church currently has a regular Sunday School provision, there is a committed group of people who are enthusiastic about growing our children's/youth offer. For example, to provide more space for our teenagers we have recently launched a 'Books and Board Games Cafe' for 11- to 18-year-olds.

The PCC has adopted a policy of admitting children to communion before confirmation, and, where required, the ministry team will prepare children for this.

## Pattern of worship

Our current pattern of worship is as follows:

- Sunday Eucharists and services
  - 8am (said) 10.30am (sung) at SMJ
  - 9.30am Eucharist or Laudate service at SA
- Daily Office
  - Monday-Friday, 8am and 5.15pm, SMJ
- Weekday Eucharists
  - Thursday, 10.30am at SMJ
  - Friday, 9.15am at SA

We also hold evensong at our mediaeval Bartlemas Chapel on the first Sunday of most months.



## Liturgy, style of worship, and Christian education

The Eucharist is at the heart of our worship, along with the Daily Office. The core Sunday liturgy in the parish is the sung Eucharist (Common Worship) with vestments and incense, congregational service settings, and hymns. This is supported by small but dedicated choirs who sing a communion anthem, and by serving teams (comprising all ages and abilities) usually

including an MC, thurifer, crucifer, and two acolytes. Major feast days, including the Triduum, are kept with full solemnity. Celebrating the diversity of our parish, our most recent Pentecost Eucharist was celebrated in several languages represented in our community. The parish is fortunate to have fine sets of Victorian and later vestments, frontals, and other apparatus for catholic worship.

SMJ typically holds more closely to the traditional Eucharistic style in its weekly Sunday services. Worship at SA's is also typically Eucharistic, though occasionally holds 'Laudate' services or services of the word. SA's has also experimented with 'Laudate Eucharists' taking some of what we love about 'Laudate' services while meeting our desire for regular Eucharists. Music is always central to our main Sunday services, regardless of the format.



We are thankful for opportunities to deepen our spiritual understanding through events and courses including our Lent book programme, Bible study groups, Camino courses, interfaith scriptural reasoning and 'Biscuits and Bible' services.

## Music



The Parish has two small but dedicated choirs, both of which are voluntary. The music is run by Alex Tester and Lawrence Tao (as a job share) at SMJ, and by Susanna Gimson at SA, all of whom are paid a small honorarium for their services.

The choirs are non-auditioning, but tackle most of the standard Anglican repertoire, singing anthems at weekly Sunday services. At SMJ there is a fine 3-manual Norman & Beard organ and a grand piano, and at SA there is a single manual Phipps organ and a baby grand piano. Much of the Sunday communion service is usually sung, including the collect and Eucharistic prayer, and a congregational mass setting is used.

The choirs regularly sing together for major services; for these, the opportunity is taken to sing larger-scale and more challenging works. We look forward to having a larger regular choir when the congregations are unified. There is also a link with East Oxford Community Choir, which rehearses in St Mary and St John church, and joins forces with our choirs for the Community Carol Service and Tenebrae in Holy Week, and with the Byrd Singers, which joins forces with St Alban's choir at Christmas. For large processions or occasions at Easter and Christmas, we also join with a local brass band.

## Baptisms, weddings, and funerals

This table shows the number of baptisms, weddings, and funerals within the parish in the last calendar year.

The numbers of these occasional offices vary year to year. The vicar and previous curate have also conducted funerals at the crematorium in recent years.

Baptisms	6
Weddings	0
Funerals	6
Crematorium funerals	12

## Cowley St John Parish in detail

### Introduction to Oxford

Oxford is an attractive city to live in for a wide range of reasons including its history, architecture, and multiculturalism. It is well-known as a centre of learning and tourism with a variety of museums, theatres, music venues, and sports facilities. It is well connected to London, being less than an hour by train. In addition to the University of Oxford and Oxford Brookes University, with their significant number of enrolled students and academic and administrative staff, other major employers include a large healthcare sector, biomedical and technological research and development, primary and secondary education, publishing, auto manufacturing, and a large service sector.

### The parish

Cowley St John finds its centre on the Cowley Road, a bustling high street, much more akin to outer London than the historic Oxford City centre, which is only a short walk (20 minutes) or cycle ride away. East Oxford, Cowley, and the Cowley Road in particular, is a distinct and lively area. Many people actively choose to live in this part of the city, valuing its tolerance and close-knit community.

The local community is ethnically, culturally, and economically diverse with a rich historical background. This has always been a vibrant part of Oxford, with a mix of 'town and gown'. Historically, many who lived in the area worked in car manufacturing and the colleges, both of which still provide employment in the parish today. Historical and recent immigration to the area, from the Windrush Generation to recently settled refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine, contribute to the vitality and vibrancy of the community. There is a substantial transient population including students, asylum seekers and refugees, and others. Cowley and East Oxford are also religiously diverse, with the Muslim faith strongly represented, including several mosques in the area. However, the parish has one of the lowest rates of religious affiliation in the UK.



The pin on this map shows the location of SMJ, with SA marked as number 3 and Bartlemas Chapel as number 2.

Recently, East Oxford and Cowley have been impacted by the introduction of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, designed to minimise traffic on side streets and encourage more active modes of transport. Whilst this has been controversial it has also inspired some initiatives, including the

development of a renewed cluster of shops, restaurants, and artists’ studios on Magdalen Road which typify not only the ongoing gentrification of the area but also its broadly ‘progressive’ ethos.

The Cowley Road is also a focus for nightlife with a variety of restaurants and bars serving primarily, but not exclusively, a large student population within the parish and beyond. There are several small supermarkets and a variety of smaller, specialist shops, a well-established farmers’ market every Saturday morning, and a well-curated monthly flea market, both of which are key attractions to residents in the area. The nearby Iffley and Magdalen Roads boast several popular shops, bakeries, gyms or yoga studios, the Gladiator Club (with regular jazz evenings), and highly rated gastropubs. Located towards the Iffley Road end of Magdalen Road is Pegasus Theatre, which has a diverse range of shows and offers arts-based groups for young people, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

## Issues and concerns in the local community

Oxford is known as one of the least affordable cities in the country, and the area is characterised by a high percentage of Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMOs) many of which accommodate students and young professionals. [Oxford Citizens UK](#) has identified the lack of affordable housing as one of its top priorities. Homelessness is a visible concern in the parish and some local initiatives and organisations, such as [The Porch](#) and [Oxford Winter Night Shelter](#), support individuals experiencing homelessness. However, housing is not the only concern that impacts East Oxford.

The [Church Urban Fund](#) (CUF) reports that the parish is currently around average on the deprivation scale for parishes in the country; this is a marked difference from a decade ago when it was one of the most deprived. This may be due to gentrification and people being priced out of the area. The CUF reports that the parish has one of the lowest proportions of people living in social housing across the country. Nevertheless, there is a significant disparity between those who are financially comfortable and those who are struggling. There are pockets of significant deprivation within the parish including those living in overcrowded accommodation and those

with insecure or zero-hours employment. Another focus of Oxford Citizens UK is ensuring that the Oxford Living Wage is accepted and adopted across the city.

There are also issues with drug and alcohol abuse and crime. Addressing anti-social behaviours, including drug use and street drinking, has been identified by Thames Valley Police (TVP) as one of their priorities in the area. This issue particularly impacts SMJ Churchyard, which is currently fully open and relatively poorly lit. We have worked alongside the council and TVP to minimise risk to members of the community, including vulnerable individuals, with temporary measures such as one blocked entrance and a security fence by the vestry door. The churchyard component of the SMJ renovation plans will address this issue with a long-term, secure, and attractive solution - see [Appendix 1](#) for more information.

## Schools in the parish

### Primary schools

We are lucky to have two parish schools: [St Mary and St John CE Primary School](#) and [St Frideswide CE Primary School](#), both of which have recently been rated 'Good' by Ofsted. We host services for the schools at SMJ Church at key points in the year and both schools value regular visits from the ministry team. Parishioners have also supported our schools by serving as foundation governors, participating in Prayer Spaces, and providing cake for staff at the end of term. As well as our two parish schools, there are two other local primary schools within the parish: East Oxford and Larkrise.

The vicar is an ex-officio member of the governing body for SMJ Primary School, which involves regular meetings throughout the year. Members of the congregation are also on the governing body for St Frideswide.

### Secondary schools

We have close links with [Oxford Spires Academy](#), with the vicar and members of the congregation having previously helped with their [Prayer Spaces](#). There are two other local secondary schools: Cheney, which sits just next to the parish border in Headington, and Greyfriars Catholic School which is adjacent to St Frideswide.

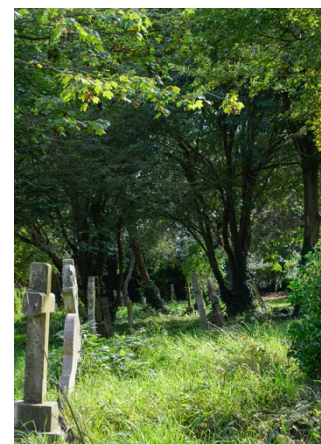
## Our church buildings

### St Mary and St John (1875)



Towering above an attractive and semi-wooded churchyard on the busy Cowley Road, the Victorian Gothic Revival Church of St Mary and St John was designed by Alfred Mardon Mowbray in the Decorated Style. The church was built in instalments beginning in 1875 and dedicated in November 1883, with later additions of a tower (1893), south porch (1893), and vestries (1911-1912). While financial limitations meant that some of the initial decorative plans were only partially realised (for example, most of the capitals in the nave were left uncarved), intricate figural and foliar designs in some of the masonry, and elaborate stained glass windows in the chancel, aisles, and transepts speak of our founders' ambitious and creative vision.

St Mary and St John is set within a large churchyard now closed for burials. It is managed for wildlife, local community access, church events, community events, and access to graves (including some war graves) and memorials. Responsibility for maintenance is shared by the City Council (tree safety and lawn mowing) and the long-standing churchyard group, which includes both church and community members. The churchyard group runs a well-attended weekly volunteer group, organises conservation projects, and runs a variety of events (music, art, wildlife, etc). The churchyard forms part of the church's eco-credentials (biodiversity and carbon capture), outreach to the local community, general community links, and



social welfare initiatives. It is regularly used by local residents as a welcome green space in an area of dense housing otherwise short of places to gather.

The SMJ Quinquennial Inspection of 2019 identified urgently needed exterior repairs; these were coupled with concern over failing electrics (lighting and heating), outdated services (loos, catering, furniture), decorative damage caused by water ingress, and anti-social (sometimes criminal) behaviour in the churchyard. These urgent issues are addressed in our parish restoration plan, detailed in the appendix.

## St Alban's (1933)



St Alban's Church is a beautiful backstreet gem, founded in 1889 as a mission church during a time of population growth in the parish. The existing building, designed by Thomas Lawrence Dale, opened its doors in 1933 (following from the original 'Tin Church' of 1889). The building is not listed or consecrated (legally a 'licensed place of worship'). It contains a Tympanum by John Henry Brookes. The complex includes a church (with piano and organ), vestry, adjoining church hall with small kitchen alcove, and toilets including an accessible toilet. As a whole, the building is in a state of good repair. However, the heating system is outdated and at the end of its life; we are in the process of deciding on an environmentally conscious system to replace it including seeking specialist advice from the diocese. We have recently received the quinquennial report for SA, which identified some small repairs and maintenance actions.

St Alban's has a small yet blossoming garden which is structurally in good repair. The churchyard is compact and low maintenance. Occasionally, the St Alban's congregation will organise a 'gardening Sunday', when they address key needs after the service. At other times volunteers put in a few hours on a particular project. Over summer we also plant and grow sunflowers and pumpkins in the garden.

As well as providing a space for refreshments after services, the hall is used by regular groups like yoga and toddler groups. It is also used for ad-hoc events like children's parties. Bookings at St Alban's typically cover its modest running costs.



A Serbian Orthodox church rents St Alban's for its regular Oxford services, which currently occur twice a month after the 9:30 service. This is part of a long-term agreement spanning multiple decades, formalised more concretely in the last decade. As part of our agreement, the Serbian Orthodox Church keeps some furniture in the church, as well as some beautiful icons.



## Bartlemas Chapel (c.14th century)



Bartlemas Chapel is our oldest parish building. It was part of St Bartholomew's Hospital founded and endowed by Henry I for twelve lepers in 1126. It is much valued for its 'step-back-in-time' feel. At present, there are sung Evensongs on the first Sunday of the month and occasional special services, such as Advent Carols. Our two choirs of St Mary and St John and St Alban's join forces for a carol service on Advent Sunday and a St Bartholomew's Day Eucharist.

## Richard Benson Hall

The Richard Benson Hall is a Grade II listed building. As part of an earlier approach to ensure financial stability for the parish, it was sympathetically refurbished in 2013 in hope of generating income from lettings to local groups. Although bookings were steady, average income struggled to reach break-even against costs of administration and maintenance. During the pandemic, the PCC rented the space [Oxford Mutual Aid, and arrangement since formalised by a regularly reviewed lease agreement](#); OMA provides 170 households with regular food and supplies as well as nearly 100 emergency food parcels each week. As well as providing an important source of income for the parish, we are also thankful that we can provide a home for such an important community initiative.

## 14 Magdalen Road

This is a former mission house, now divided into seven small flats that are rented commercially, with the help of a professional agent. The rent from these flats is a key source of income for our parish and typically covers the majority of our parish share.

## Irving Building

The Irving Building is a Victorian school building that was owned by Cowley St John Parish and formed part of St Mary & St John School. In July 2015 it was closed, and the school amalgamated into the site in Meadow Lane.

The building was purchased by [Magdalen Road Church](#) (MRC), a member of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, with a view to developing it as a church and community asset. A term of the sale to MRC includes ownership of two of their planned flats by Cowley St John PCC to be made available for key workers in the area. All the negotiations between MRC and the PCC must include the Diocese due to Charitable Law. Currently MRC have yet to start their development project due to extended discussion with Oxford City Council planners and the developers. The PCC continue to be stakeholders and part of contractual discussions. We are guided by the Diocese and a firm of Charitable Law solicitors.

## Other places of worship and faiths in the parish

Cowley St John is situated in a highly diverse faith environment, with Methodist and Catholic churches, the Christian Life Centre, the Church of Christ and Magdalen Road Church in the parish. It also is close to the Manzil Way, Stanley Road, and Bath Street Mosques and Asian Cultural Centre, as well as Thrangu House - a Vajrayana Buddhist centre - and the (Jewish) Chabad of Oxford. Inter-denominational and interfaith work are pivotally important, not only because of this diversity but also due to periodic national and global strains (the Israel-Gaza war is ongoing as this is written), and not too distant local history (the Bullfinch grooming scandal, in response to which faith leaders visibly drew together), as well as through the newly launched Oxford Citizens UK, which engages all faith actors.

In practice, the parish collaboration often manifests through two channels: public activities and informal relationships. Interfaith activities we regularly participate in include an Interfaith Walk (ordinarily mid-June), the OxClean Interfaith Litter Pick (which the parish sometimes organises or host). Among denominations there are church exchange visits during the week of Prayer for Christian Unity; the parish also co-organises a Stations of the Cross (Walk of Witness) in East Oxford, involving prayers and presence from the local faith communities. In addition, Oxford Citizens UK and many of the myriad of local ministries are supported by multiple denominations and faith communities.

Examples of interfaith activities we advertise (and may participate in) tend to be one-off events such as an Interfaith 'Big Lunch' at the Asian Cultural Centre on the occasion of the Coronation, or a Peace Vigil for the Israel-Gaza war. To give an example of liturgical cooperation, some years in the East Oxford Community Carol service, a designate from the mosque has offered a reading from the Qu'ran of Mary the Mother of Jesus. Informally, it is natural for the vicar to build informal relationships with the leaders of the three mosques, as well as the Muslim chaplain to the Universities (the same person serves both and is based in East Oxford), and the local church leaders, as many issues that might arise are addressed effectively through this network.

## Community and charity links

We seek to be outward-looking in terms of our role within the wider community. We have strong links with various groups within the area, for example, Oxford Mutual Aid, All Saints

Sisters of the Poor, and the Oxford Winter Night Shelter. Some of these links are more established than others and we are thankful for our parishioners who work hard to build and maintain these links. We have also become one of the founding members of the new Oxford branch of Citizens UK. We have joined the Eco-Church movement.

One of our longest-standing community links is with the Gladiator Club. The Gladiator Club was founded by the Cowley Fathers as a Christian foundation and traditional social club, with premises on the Iffley Road. It was set up as a charity, originally with Trustees from our parish, but later this changed. The trustees of the Gladiator Club once owned the building; this was sold a decade ago and the Club now leases the premises and faces an uncertain future. Its bar is open most evenings and has lower-cost drinks. On Mondays, they host a coffee morning for some 50 seniors. The last Tuesday of every month is jazz night; and on other nights local musicians come or members play Aunt Sally, a traditional game. Some church members are members of the Club. In the past, members of the parish would visit at least once before Christmas to sing carols. The vicar of the parish is the ex-officio President of the Gladiator Club. This requires the vicar to take the Chair at the club's AGM and read out some printed notices. The Gladiator Club staff are looking forward to welcoming the new vicar to this role.

There are also several residents' associations, including the Divinity Road Area Residents Association (DRARA) and the Robin Hood Residents Association (RHRA). The parish has a long-standing link with DRARA through members of the congregation and RHRA is a newly established association which has already sought to make links with the parish, particularly with St Alban's due to its proximity to the Robin Hood neighbourhood.

## Safeguarding

The parish is committed to promoting a safer church which shapes our culture and how we work together as a team. We are committed to total compliance with the Church of England's Safeguarding Policy. Our Parish Safeguarding Officer is Lorna Robinson, who may be contacted at [safeguardingcowleystjohn@gmail.com](mailto:safeguardingcowleystjohn@gmail.com).

All members of the PCC are up to date with their safeguarding training, and all are aware of the processes that need to be followed, particularly if anyone were to raise concerns.

## Finance

Our provisional 2023 accounts show a surplus of £10k, though this is due to a one-off donation of that amount in the year. We have had deficits in the previous 4 years: £26k in 2022, £85k in 2021, £41k in 2020 and £45k in 2019. Our main sources of income in 2023 were rent from our investment property at 14 Magdalen Rd of £87k, hire of our premises of £35k and donations of £54k. Our total assets comprise our rental property valued at £1.5 million, current cash at bank of £175k and investments of £50k.

The cost of maintaining our buildings has contributed significantly to our deficit budgets, with some large expenditure on previously neglected issues. While our buildings are now managed more effectively, we are conscious of the need to plan for future maintenance, which is why the PCC has recently agreed to creating a maintenance fund.

We also typically pay our parish share in full - the Deanery has an agreed formula and generally works cooperatively.

Please view our full accounts at the [Charity Commission website](#).

## Your next steps

You can learn more about us at our website, <http://cowleystjohn.co.uk/>.

If you are open to considering whether you might be called to this role, we would be glad to hear from you and answer your questions. To learn more about the position, please contact Canon Robin Ward, the representative of the parish patron, St Stephen's House, at [robin.ward@ssho.ac.uk](mailto:robin.ward@ssho.ac.uk).



# Appendix 1: Parish Reordering Project

In this appendix, you can find out more about the background, timeline and plans for our ongoing parish reordering project.

## A. Challenges: Buildings, Churchyard, and Finance 2013-2020

- i. The incumbency of Fr Philip Ritchie (2015-23) coincided with the need to reassess parish mission in light of present-day resources. Pre-pandemic attendance at main Sunday services in both churches was significantly less than half of each building's capacity. The 2019 SMJ Quinquennial identified urgently needed exterior and interior repairs and upgrades, and anti-social (sometimes criminal) behaviour in the churchyard was a chronic problem.
- ii. The PCC commissioned a Statement of Need and Statement of Significance for SMJ from Oxford Heritage Partnership in 2019, the chief finding of which was that the parish had too many buildings for both its needs and resources.
- iii. The parish had also for many years run an operating deficit covered by draw-down from finite cash reserves from bequests and sale of property. An attempt to address the dwindling income stream by refurbishing and lettings of the parish hall produced only break-even results.

## B. The Evolving Vision 2020-23

- i. A strong parish view emerged that addressing the challenges above should be approached as a way to consolidate and strengthen our worship and ministry. Attention focussed on opening SMJ to community use when not in use for services, which would better justify the expense of the necessary works and give our main building a 7-day presence and purpose. For that to be possible, we would need to make the churchyard safer, and the church be refurbished. In 2019 the parish architect David Spragg (Acanthus Clews) and Charlie Clews (Clews Landscape Architecture) were commissioned to draft proposals for these specifications.
- ii. Church and churchyard plans were developed in consultation with the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC), community, parish, and PCC. The churchyard plans for new railings, gates, and enhanced lighting and paths were approved by the City Council with strong support from Thames Valley Police in 2022. The PCC then selected one of the three design options for the church building presented by David Spragg. The DAC scrutinised the chosen option on-site and gave their full in-principle support.
- iii. The parish-approved plans met all of the briefs' aims: a refurbished building with sustainable heating and lighting, new sound system, repositioned font, west-end servery for light catering, accessible WC, reordered vestry and sacristy, and new street-visible access to the church offices, all set in a more responsibly secured churchyard. Folded into the scheme will be the remaining Priority 1 item from the most recent Quinquennial (re-enforcement works to the west tower). The architects' cost estimate for the complete scheme is c. £800 - £900k.

- i. The parish then proceeded to address the question of uniting its two congregations in a refurbished SMJ. Throughout a long process of reflection and consultation, members of both congregations regretted the loss of a place of worship as long rooted in the community as St Alban's. On balance, given financial pressures, future clergy provision, the size of the two congregations post-pandemic, and the advantages of pooling resources for worship, ministry, and community service, the PCC in 2022 passed, by a more-than-75% majority (11 in favour, 1 abstain, 1 against), a resolution to unite the two congregations at St Alban's during the refurbishment of SMJ, and upon its completion to occupy SMJ as one congregation.
- ii. In September 2023 the PCC resolved to instruct the parish architect to proceed to final plans for its approval and application to the DAC for the relevant faculties. In December, the diocese's Parish Development Officer confirmed to the parish and the DAC that these well-advanced plans should proceed without delay during the interregnum.

## C. Where we are now

After almost ten years of work, we are now proceeding with architects' final plans with a view to DAC permissions. The project is guided by a sub-committee of the PCC (the Project Committee), whose members have significant experience in buildings maintenance, finance, and charity governance. In the first months of 2024 the Committee's main task is to liaise with the parish architect to select and recommend a sustainable heating system, which is the last outstanding decision necessary for final architect's plans.

We are not a parish with a wealthy member base, so stewardship through members' giving chiefly supports our annual operating budget. This leaves external grant-funding bodies as our expected source of funds for the SMJ refurbishment. We are confident that the community benefit of a 7/7 church available for wider use, and the enhancement of the churchyard, will appeal to a range of donor organisations. On the clear advice of both the parish architect and the DAC, we have adopted a strict policy of not beginning fund-raising until final DAC permissions are in place. However, much background thinking has already gone into likely sources of funding. We expect to need professional advice to help us assemble an effectively targeted and staged grant-application and fundraising strategy.