

The Jewel in the Crown

The historic church of St Mary's is rightly acclaimed as 'the Jewel in the Crown' of the parish. This Grade 1 listed building nestles at the foot of the North Downs and forms part of the united benefice of Bearsted and Thurnham (i.e. two ecclesiastical parishes which share a vicar). The boundary of the ecclesiastical parish is shown in blue on the map (right). Its southern boundary is almost contiguous with the M20 motorway – unlike the civil parish which extends some distance south of that line.

Saxon in origin, the church, like many of its age, requires substantial sums of money to be spent on it to keep it in good order.

The quinquennial architectural review carried out in 2006 identified nearly £400,000 of maintenance work required on the church over the following five years. Some of this, such as repairs to the roof of the tower, is essential; other work is of lower priority. It is anticipated that when tenders are received for the first stage of this work – including the tower – that these will be in excess of £130,000.

A fund raising campaign has been launched and has already received £14,000 in donations and some £54,000 in other pledges.

The Parochial Church Council has for many years accumulated cash reserves to provide for the proverbial rainy day to be drawn upon as need arose. It is intended that these reserves will be used to help with the restoration. While these will make a substantial contribution to the first phase of the work, they are nowhere near enough to meet the full programme of work identified under the quinquennial review, and some funds must be retained to ensure that the life of the church can continue. St Mary's will therefore need

to look beyond the Church Estate if it is to complete the work. But any such approach raises wider issues.

The income from the cottages and allotments in Ware Street has sustained St Mary's for many years since the parish is not viable from giving within the parish itself. Church services are attended by an average of 15 people and the church is heavily dependant on the lay ministry of Holy Cross.

This situation has caused the vicar, John Corbyn, to open a debate about the long term future of St Mary's. In particular,

he has questioned whether it is right to spend so much money on the building when the congregation is in long term decline and when other places of worship are readily available, and whether the use of such large sums of money, on what could be argued is essentially a heritage project, is an appropriate use of funds or whether they would be better spent on the church's ministry and mission.

The size of the congregation is not a new issue. Some one hundred years ago the Thurnham Mission Hall was built in Ware Street (shown

on the left in the photograph below, just where the entrance to the Sandy Mount housing estate stands today) in order to bring church services nearer to the





centre of Thurnham's population who were disinclined to make the mile-long walk to St Mary's.

The Hall was used for both religious and secular purposes until after the war when this part of the ecclesiastical parish of Thurnham was transferred to Bearsted. Given its declining congregation and proximity to Holy Cross it was decided to discontinue its use as a Mission Hall. It subsequently became an extra barn for Sandy Mount farm until it was demolished to make way for the housing development of 1969.

St Mary's distance from the main centres of population remains a problem. While the car has reduced travelling time, the lack of parking spaces near the church place constraints on its use.

However, while the congregation may be small, it is very committed and determined to do all it can to keep St Mary's open as a place of worship. To many who are not regular church goers St Mary's is an iconic building that they would want to see preserved. Seventy nine per cent of those responding to our questionnaire thought it very important or important to preserve the church and other historic buildings and sites in the parish.

The Parish Council regularly contributes to the cost of maintaining the churchyard and church clock and has recently provided a fine new notice board. In the pictures above John Horne, the first Thurnham councillor to become Mayor of Maidstone, undertakes

"Encourage more community use of St Mary's Church – explore possibility of having a 'green' car park for it. the church could become a focus for Parish Council and other activities."

Thurnham resident

the unveiling ceremony and hands over the keys to Church Warden, Graham Morecroft, watched by the Chairman of Thurnham Parish Council, Richard Jacques (far left) and the Lady Mayoress.

The Parish Council takes a close interest in the long term future of the building, has been considering ways in which its use might be expanded and enhanced by the provision of car parking space nearby and has met the Vicar to discuss the issues he has raised.

This debate is not something that will be concluded quickly. But what is clear is that public use of the church would be greatly assisted by the provision of a car park in Thurnham Lane and that providing for a more flexible use of the building would inevitably entail major financial implications. The fixed costs alone of keeping the building running on a day to day basis exceed £6,000 a year.

The future of St Mary's is something in which everyone in Thurnham should be encouraged to express a view and to make their views known to the Parish Council and the vicar.

We recommend that:

- The Parochial Church Council and the Parish Council should set up a group to consider the long term future of St Mary's and how best its wider use by the community can be funded.**