

**St Mary the Virgin Church  
Little Blakenham Suffolk**  
2023 Parochial Church Council  
Annual Report and Fabric Report  
1<sup>st</sup> January 2023 - 31<sup>st</sup> December 2023



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## **Rector's Annual Benefice Report for the Benefice of Bramford with Little Blakenham, Baylham and Nettlestead 2023**

It's the time of year in our churches when we take stock of the previous year. We hold annual meetings in all our churches, at which we elect our churchwardens and receive reports on the activities and financial position of our Parishes.

As Rector of 4 Rural parishes, I am asked sometimes if I enjoy what I do, are you thinking of leaving? I reply I have been called to serve in these parishes, which is a privilege and blessing.

We have been here amongst you all for three years, arriving during the lockdown period in 2021.

Our pattern of worship has settled into a regular routine following some tweaks, with a main Sunday service in one of the churches in the Benefice each Sunday.

I find it interesting to look at our visitor's books and see what people think of your Parish churches. A regular comment is always how lovely it is to find them open. On one occasion I meet a couple in St Mary's Bramford, who had been looking at our notice board. They wondered why a village the size of Bramford only had an electoral roll of 20. All I could say was that on major celebrations people do come, but life is so busy for many. Coming to church on a Sunday morning is no longer a priority in their lives. This is of course true of each parish.

I have in the past year attempted to be present and be seen, and people are very polite and talk to me, but the often-repeated quote is, I used to go but don't anymore. I continue to pray for growth.

Another area which continues to be a issue is church finances. I am extremely grateful to our four church treasurers for their diligence. We continue to find it challenging to cover the costs of running our church buildings. Not helped with the cost of fuel in 2023.

Our parishes hold regular fundraising events and these are essential if we are to keep our churches open. But we need to find ways of encouraging more regular giving in our parishes if we are to sustain the churches.

As you know I am a House for duty Priest, who is contracted to work two days a week plus Sunday. For this I am given accommodation, but no salary. The Diocese requested of the benefice a payment of parish share of £23,600 for 2023 which we managed to pay. If in the future you were to get a full-time paid priest without a doubt this would rise to close to £65,000, which clearly based on current income would not be achievable.

Also, alongside Parish share we have general running cost for each parish. I continue to pray that a way may be found for a revival in generosity to the church in all parishes too.

Let's look back at what has been done.

### **Services**

A Sunday service at least once a month in one of our churches in the Benefice. 8am Book of common prayer Communion,

Morning prayer said everyday Monday to Friday in a church. Midweek Holy Communion every Wednesday at noon at Bramford.

### **Others Services during the year**

Ash Wednesday, Lent course, Holy week services of meditation, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday walk of Witness, Easter Saturday, Easter Day, Pentecost, Harvest. Remembrance, Carol and crib Services, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Pet Service All Souls Service

### **Events in the Benefice**

Easter egg hunt, Bramford Fun Day

Lt Blakenham Snowdrops, Lt Blakenham Jumble sale, Lt Blakenham Village fete and Dog Show

Harvest supper in all four churches

Talk by Roy Tricker at Baylham, Talk at Baylham about Bats followed by BBQ (Not Bats)

Coffee mornings at Baylham, Bramford and Lt Blakenham

Christmas bazaar at Bramford and Little Blakenham

Ipswich wind band concert at Bramford

Community churchyard tidy at Baylham

During the year I visit Bramford Primary School on a weekly basis and Bramford Church School visited the church for Easter, Harvest, Remembrance and Christmas services.

I visit Baylham Care home every Month for a short service and also offer home communion to a number of our parishioners who are unable to come to church.

There are regular services at Cherryfields in Bramford which are in the most run by The Methodist church, but on occasions I lead the service. We had a joint service in Cherryfields at Christmas.

During the year, we enjoyed a number of Baptisms in the benefice, and several Weddings. Funerals continue to be a large part of my ministry in the Benefice.

There has also been a major piece of work undertaken for St Mary's Nettlestead. Following on from the replacement of the roof tiles, rainwater goods and drainage, the second phase of the project has progressed with plans close to approval to for a reordering of the west end, which includes the provision of a small kitchen area and new storage. Removal of several pews at the west end on both the north and south side, and the font relocated and the plinth reduced, alongside this the font is to be taken away for restoration. There are plans to update the lighting and heating, and to remove the internal render up to window height and render with new lime mortar and lime wash. There is also plan to remove some of the unsightly concrete render on the exterior of the church. I wish to thank the PCC at Nettlestead for all their hard work in this endeavour, but especially Dr Maureen Gardiner.

We continue also to investigate the East end of Little Blakenham Church, relating to potential movement in the structure, all of which is dependent on funds being available.

We were pleased to receive a donation of £500 to renew the lighting on the spire at Bramford with new low energy fittings, we also repaired a leak in the roof and led work on the roof of the tower.

I am pleased that each of our churches has a Church Warden and wish to thank, Paul (Bramford), Viv (Baylham) Pam (Nettlestead) Michele (Little Blakenham) for their hard work and support.

May I also thank all members of our four PCCs for their work over the past 12 months. We are always looking for new members, please contact me if you are interested?

Finally, I was pleased in this third year in the benefice to finally lead Christmas Eve services in every church in the Benefice for the first time since I arrived in 2021.

I continue to minister to you all and pray that our parishes remain a focal point for the residents of each parish in our Benefice. I thank all those who have supported our churches during the year.

Reverend Eric Falla  
Rector

## 2023 Little Blakenham Annual and Fabric Report

### Population Little Blakenham

How many people live locally?	Children Under 16	Working Age Adults (16 to 64)	People Aged 65 +	Dependency Ratio
<b>295</b>	<b>68 (23.0%)</b>	<b>179 (60.7%)</b>	<b>48 (16.3%)</b>	<b>0.65</b>
Males: 48.5% Females: 51.5%	Mid Sflk Avg = 18.4% England Avg = 18.9%	Mid Sflk Avg = 61.5% England Avg = 64.7%	Mid Sflk Avg = 20.1% England Avg = 16.3%	Mid Sflk Avg = 0.63 England Avg = 0.55

Source: Little Blakenham Housing and Population date profile Mid Suffolk District Council, 2019. <https://www.babergh.gov.uk> › Parish-Profiles

The Parochial Church Council (P.C.C) are Charity Trustees governed by the Parochial Church Councils (Powers) Measure 1956. PCC members hold office in accordance with the Church Representation Rules either ex officio, by election or appointment at the Annual Parochial Church Meeting or by co-option.

This Annual and Fabric, Goods and Ornaments Report of St Mary the Virgin Church is a significant document which reflects the life of our village church in accordance with The Church Representation Rules (Rule 9(1) (b)) which requires 'an annual report on the proceedings of the parochial church council and the activities of the parish generally.'

### Aims and Objectives

The sole charitable object of the PCC is the 'promotion of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to the doctrines and practices of the Church of England' and has a statutory responsibility to co-operate with the Vicar in promoting in the parish, the whole mission of the church, pastoral, evangelistic, social and ecumenical.

As Charity Trustees, PCC members have a duty to meet the 'public benefit' requirement and to demonstrate that our aims are for the public benefit through the advancement of education, religion, or relieving poverty. alongside being lawfully responsible for the maintenance of the fabric of the parish church and churchyard and to consider how to manage maintenance issues, including those arising out of the Quinquennial Inspections.

Our first objective is Christian fellowship through regular provision for worship and promotion of the Gospel to our community, alongside enabling individuals to receive spiritual guidance and education in the Christian doctrine and to use that strength to serve God and contribute towards a better society and financial stability for the future vision of our parish church.

Our main aims this year have been:

- Promote the Christian doctrine through regular services and reintegrate our church back into the community and beyond.
- To support and work in partnership with Reverend Eric Falla.
- Promote and deliver fundraising events to the community to assist building relationships, friendships, and financial resources to aid our churches financial stability.
- Continue addressing List, A items on the 2020 Quinquennial Report, compiling a maintenance plan but specifically the monitoring, management and continued maintenance of the East wall.
- Encourage and welcome new members to our congregation, volunteers, and new PCC members.

### PCC Membership and Roles



The PCC APCM was held on 28th May 2023 and the following persons have served as members for all of the period.

Priest in Charge – Reverend Eric Falla (installed 12<sup>th</sup> April 2021, Instituted 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2023)

Churchwarden - Michele Kenningale

Vacancy

Secretary – Michele Kenningale

Treasurer – Julia Buckmaster sadly resigned on 18<sup>th</sup> September 2023 The PCC wish to thank Julia for all her hard

work and continued support.

New Treasurer's and Signatory's - Michele Kenningale and Angeline Whittaker (from 19<sup>th</sup> September 2023)

Deanery Synod Representative - Angeline Whittaker

## Vacancy

Electoral Roll Officer – Vacant  
Safeguarding: Rev Eric Falla  
Health and Safety: Rev Eric Falla and Michele Kenningale  
Designated Fire Officer: Angie Whittaker

Lorraine Wright,  
Rita Palmer.

### PCC Meetings

In 2023 the PCC held 6 meetings and therefore met the required regulations of at least four meetings in a 12 Month period. PCC Meetings were held on:

16<sup>th</sup> January, 21<sup>st</sup> March, 28<sup>th</sup> May APCM followed by PCC meeting, 10<sup>th</sup> July, 4<sup>th</sup> September, 6<sup>th</sup> November.

### Induction and Institution of Rector The Reverend Eric Falla

On Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2023 at St Mary's Church, Bramford, there was a A Service of Induction and Institution of the Reverend Eric Falla as Rector of the Benefice of Bramford with Little Blakenham, Baylham and Nettlestead by The Right Reverend Dr Mike Harrison, Bishop of Dunwich and The Venerable Dr David Jenkins, Archdeacon of Sudbury.

### Electoral Roll

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### Life Events 2023

**Baptisms:** One on 24<sup>th</sup> September 2023 (previous Baptism 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2022 which was the First Baptism since 7<sup>th</sup> December 2014)

**Confirmations:** None since 1<sup>st</sup> November 1998.

**Marriages:** None

Note: The Marriage Register was deposited at Ipswich Registry Office in 2021 as per new guidelines. Prior to removal the last marriage documented in the Register was dated 6/11/2019).

**Funerals:** None (last funeral was on Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> November 2021).

### Church Services

Morning prayer is held on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday of each month at 8:30am and a Sunday service with Holy Communion held on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday each month at 11am.

The return of regular services has positively increased since Rev Eric's arrival and PCC members give grateful thanks to those from our sister parishes who support us.

The tables below reflect monthly attendance although they may appear low, historically, the attendance numbers are consistent with those recorded at the start of the service register in 1977.

### Morning Prayer

Morning Prayer 2023	Attendance	Morning Prayer 2023	Attendance	Morning Prayer 2023	Attendance
January 18 <sup>th</sup>	2	May 17 <sup>th</sup>	Not recorded	September 20 <sup>th</sup>	Not recorded
February 15 <sup>th</sup>	4	June 21 <sup>st</sup>	2	October 18 <sup>th</sup>	3
March 15 <sup>th</sup>	3	July 19 <sup>th</sup>	3	November 15 <sup>th</sup>	2
April 19 <sup>th</sup>	3	August 16 <sup>th</sup>	2	December 20 <sup>th</sup>	2

Table 2. Morning Prayer Attendance January 2023 – December 2023.<sup>1</sup>

### <sup>1</sup>Sunday Worship

Sunday worship is held on the fourth Sunday in the month at 11am.

Life since Covid is returning to some form of normality, including spiritually. We are pleased to report that all churches in the Benefice now receive full communion and have also replaced the traditional wafers with bread.

Sunday worship is regularly supported by members from our sister parishes and our provision of post service homemade refreshments have become quite a social event and provides an opportunity to build relationships and have a chat.

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<sup>1</sup> St Mary the Virgin Church, Little Blakenham, Service Register.

There is 'giving basket' at the church at the font for donations all year round which are then distributed to local charities. We give thanks to those who have and continue to donate items.

Sunday Service 2023	Communicants	Attendance	Sunday Service 2023	Communicants	Attendance
January 22 <sup>nd</sup>	12	13	July 23 <sup>rd</sup>	24	25
February 26 <sup>th</sup>	8	11	August 27 <sup>th</sup>	17	18
March 26 <sup>th</sup>	15	17	September 24 <sup>th</sup> Baptism	20	48
April 23 <sup>rd</sup>	13	13	October 22 <sup>nd</sup> Harvest	15	16
May 28 <sup>th</sup>	15	19	November 26 <sup>th</sup>	15	18
June 25 <sup>th</sup>	15	15	December 24 <sup>th</sup>	No Communion	55 (including 7 children)

Table 2. Sunday Service Attendance, January 2023 – December 2023.<sup>2</sup>

### **Armistice Day, 11<sup>th</sup> November 2023**



Sadly we were unable to provide a small service or dedication in 2023 to give thanks and remember all those who have lost their lives in the World Wars, especially our local man Percy Herbert Welham of the Suffolk Regiment who lived on Leather Bottle Hill and has a Commonwealth War Grave in our churchyard.

### **Children and Young Adults**

We sadly have no young people presently who attend our church, this is an issue the PCC is keen to change and will be focusing upon over the next year and welcome and support any new members of our growing congregation.

### **Pastoral Care and Service to the Community**

Pastoral care for one another and our wider community continues to be at the heart of our parish life. The contact numbers for the Vicar and Churchwarden are displayed on the church notice boards at the entrance gate and south porch, alongside the 'In Touch', ACNY, social media sites and the Benefice Facebook page for anyone with pastoral and safeguarding concerns.

### **Parish Safeguarding**

The parish Safeguarding Policy is available for inspection in the parish church vestry.

Eric is presently designated Safeguarding Officer, whilst the PCC attempt to find a willing candidate. Anyone with concerns regarding a safeguarding issue of children and vulnerable adults can contact Eric or the churchwarden.

### **Charitable Giving**

Eric has introduced a 'giving basket' at the church font for donations all year round which are then distributed to local charities. We give thanks to those who have and continue to donate items.

We also have an annual jumble sale and donate items that are not sold to various local charities.

### **Communication, Publicity.**

The PCC recognises the importance of ensuring the church is open, welcoming and used by the community and visitors alike.

The PCC are keen for the church to be used not only for religious services but for reflection, social events and as a point of contact. The biggest challenge continues to be not only the reintegration of the church back into the community but attendance at services and volunteers to unlock and lock up.

Church Community Events are advertised with roadside Banners and Boards, ACNY, Nextdoor App, Little Blakenham Facebook page, Benefice page, Ipswich 24 and local shops and pubs.

## **Community and Fundraising Events 2023**

### **Monthly Coffee Mornings 10am-12noon 3<sup>rd</sup> Saturday each month in the Village Hall**



PCC Coffee mornings were started in 2021 and held in the Village Hall to support our Parish Council colleagues.

The PCC continually review the mornings and are please to confirm that they will continue for the foreseeable future.

### **Blakenham Woodland Garden Snowdrop Festival 11<sup>th</sup> February**

<sup>2</sup> St Mary the Virgin Church, Little Blakenham, Service Register.



Marcia Blakenham has done much to connect the two sister parishes of Little Blakenham and Nettlestead by inviting members from the two villages for the second year to host the refreshments on the first day of this event. The proceeds from the day were generously donated and divided equally between the two churches. Our gratitude goes to Marcia, and everyone who donated their bakes and were involved for their generous support and who made the day so enjoyable.



Blakenham Woodland Garden Snowdrop Festival 11<sup>th</sup> February 2023

**Annual Jumble Sale 29<sup>th</sup> April 2023**



The PCC annual jumble sale is held in the Village Hall opposite the church and has become a well-supported event with both donations and attendance. The event is needed more than ever after Covid pandemic and recent severe 'cost of living' crisis. Following PCC and volunteer review, items now that are not sold are donated to local charities whilst others, namely branded/vintage items which we know will not achieve a reflective price at the sale are sold on e-bay.

**Little Blakenham Village Fete and Dog Show 29<sup>th</sup> July 2023**



**Ride and Stride Bike Ride 9<sup>th</sup> September 2023**



The Annual Sponsored Ride and Stride is a national event, held every second Saturday in September. Cyclists and walkers all-round the country are out making money for their local county Churches Trust. The idea started in Suffolk and is the main source of income to Suffolk Historic Churches Trust which enable the Trust to make grants to churches and chapels of all denominations towards repair and restoration costs. Participants are sponsored for each place of worship visited between 9.00am and 5.00pm on Ride and Stride Day or with a donation, regardless of the number of churches visited. The money raised by each cyclist or walker is shared equally between the Suffolk Historic Churches Trust and the place of worship nominated by the participant.

As important as the participants are the many volunteers who give up the day to man the churches and chapels and sign in the cyclists and walkers as they arrive. Our church supports this event each year with a team of volunteers.

**Harvest Supper 21<sup>st</sup> October 2023**



The Harvest Supper was originally named the “Mell-supper” which refers to the last patch of corn/wheat standing. The supper is both a symbolic and historic event in rural communities and reflects a celebration and the giving of thanks for a successful harvest and abundance of food. It is a great social event which gives opportunity for communities to come together and share meals, stories and friendship.

This year we had the first Harvest Supper for many years, on the evening before our Harvest Festival. Despite much advertising it was a little disappointing that many in the community did not respond, but it was the first event so we are hoping as the community joins in more and more with church events this event in particular will be supported more.

Heartfelt thanks must go to both Lorraine and Steve Wright for all their hard work, the most wonderful cooking and the numerous trips Steve made from their home to the Village Hall with everything including the tableware. The evening was so enjoyable and a chance to catch up with each other and have a few giggles. Thanks to everyone who supported the event and came.



### Harvest Festival 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2023

Our church continues the Harvest tradition of thanks for the abundance of food, through the donation of unperishable goods and toiletry items which are then donated to a different local food bank each year.

Volunteers decorate the church beautifully in traditional style. The front door wreath is made from corn grown in the village as are the corn dolly's placed on the outside of each pew. A Harvest loaf is also made by the churchwarden and was lent to our sister parish of Bramford for their own Harvest Festival celebrations.



Harvest Festival 2023

### Christmas Bazaar 30<sup>th</sup> November 2023



Christmas Bazaar 2023

The Christmas Bazaar was held on 25<sup>th</sup> November this year and once again well supported, through handmade crafts and bakes, donations and attendance. PCC members were proud to hear the positive feedback regarding the church, quality of goods, food and mulled wine. We were also surprised just how many people had come from other villages to visit us, with some starting to become regulars.

Rev. Eric once again went above and beyond being so supportive and in the full spirit of Christmas, his speakers bellowing out songs of Christmas across the village.

The PCC and our volunteers regularly review all our events and this year after discussing with Rev Eric, trialled using the altar space which felt a little uncomfortable for us older people but it enabled us to have an extra stall alongside a refreshment area inside the church where people could sit and chat and even get up again and buy more! The feedback from this from both our visitors and volunteers was a positive one, many were especially glad to have a sit down with a warm mince pie, sausage roll, and a warm drink, the warm mulled wine chose to be very popular whether visitors bought items or not and a valuable cash builder.

It continues to surprise PCC members just how well this event is supported from not only residents but by those from other parishes alongside the generous donations we receive for all our events which ultimately makes such a significant financial difference to our church's fundraising, alongside raising the churches profile to the community and beyond and is definitely a social event that brings people together of which we are very proud.

Our grateful thanks go to everyone who donated items, baked, contributed, and supported us but especially Rev. Eric and the time he invests in all his parish churches, we are forever grateful to the difference you have made.

**Carol Singing 15<sup>th</sup> December 2023**



This was the third year the PCC held the Carol Singing around Little Box Meadow and The Beeches. Due to the village being spread out, we were unable to include Leather Bottle Hill and The Common as both areas are on busy main roads and have no footpath.

Eric 2021

**Christmas Eve Service by Candlelight 18th December 2022.**



Christmas Eve Service 2023

It is at this special time of year our village church truly comes alive, lit by candlelight, the church reflected its long history and how it may have looked many years ago. To encompass this history further we have reintroduced over the last three years a unique element to the villages history and Christmas service by playing the 'Little Blakenham Carol'.

The words were originally discovered by Pete Jennings of BBC Radio Suffolk, and Chairman of the Suffolk Pagan Society in a notebook started in 1891 by folklorist Charles Partridge who had quoted Revd John Jackson, Rector of Little Blakenham, who prior to his death in 1895 had taken down the words from an aged parishioner.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The village has its own version of an old carol, surviving the days when the churches standardised onto a common hymnal. Pete Jennings of BBC Radio Suffolk, and also Chairman of the Suffolk Pagan Society, found the words in a notebook started in 1891 by a folklorist called Charles

Our attendance at the Christmas Eve Service has increased significantly over the last three years as the community becomes familiar with our events. Attendance in 2022 was 42 but this year, 2023 it was 55 including 7 children. We are therefore reviewing next year's service to make it more interactive and will offer children present the opportunity to participate if they wish to.

We were pleased that many stayed for the post service refreshments which included seasonal warm mulled wine and a host of classic Christmas homemade bakes.

### **Methods of Communication and Social media platforms used:**

A Church Near You (ACNY), St Mary's Nextdoor App, Benefice Facebook page and the Little Blakenham Nextdoor/Facebook Page Eric also posts each month in the 'In Touch' magazine.

Posters and Banners to advertise events.

We also have a page dedicated to St Mary's on 'British Express' Tourism website to attract visitors and due to the hidden position of the church, a sandwich chalk board is used outside by the road to advertise when the church is open in an attempt to increase visitors, there is also a visitors book inside for feedback.

### **Professional Advisors**

Bankers: Lloyds Bank, 13 Cornhill, Ipswich, Suffolk, IP1 1DG.

Insurers: Ecclesiastical Insurance Group, Beaufort House, Brunswick Road, Gloucester, GL1 1JZ

Architect: David Whymark, The Studio, Stack Wood Road, Polstead, Colchester, C06 5BA.

Independent Examiner: Harry Moore F.C.A, Chartered Accountant, 2 Lime Kiln Close, Claydon, IP6 OAW. (Retired this year)

## **Churchwardens' Report on the Fabric, Goods and Ornaments of the Churches**



Little Blakenham Church etched by Henry Davy c.1857

St Mary the Virgin, Little Blakenham is a Grade I listed medieval building situated high up on a hill yet in a tucked away rural setting and serves a population of approximately 295 souls.

### **Brief Church History**

The church became Grade I listed on December 9<sup>th</sup> 1955, and consists of Nave, chancel, west tower, south porch. It has plastered rubble walling to body of church with freestone dressings.

The tower has exposed rubble walls of flint with brick and limestone inclusions. Plain tiled roofs (the tower roof is leaded with battlemented parapets).

The porch is probably of C15 origin, with moulded doorway and the remnants of side windows (all in freestone) and coupled-rafter roof; major repairs in brickwork are of C16 and later. Good mid C13 east chancel window of 3 stepped lancets under one arch, with pierced trefoils in the spandrels. On the inner face are engaged columns and on either side are large recesses with trefoiled heads and similar columns; in the survey of J.H. and Jas Parker (1855), both recesses had mediaeval figure paintings. A lancet in the east wall has 2 figures and freezework painted on the reveals; these were repainted in 1850. A mid C14 south chancel window has mask corbels. Extensive late C14 alterations include most of the 2-light windows, the south nave doorway and the plain unbuttressed tower. This has brick relieving arches above windows and a lion-head gargoyle on the west. The bell-frame is original, repaired in C16. Late C14 canted and boarded nave roof with moulded cornice; the chancel roof was probably rebuilt in 1868. Early C16 alterations include 2 chancel windows, priest's doorway and piscina.

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*Partridge. He was quoting Revd John Jackson of Little Blakenham, who had taken down the words from an aged parishioner. This had been published in "Suffolk Notes & Queries" No 121. Pete could not locate a version of the work locally, so researched at Cecil Sharp House in London, the headquarters of the English Folk Song And Song Society. The only thing Pete could find related to it was an Irish hymnal, which provided some similar verses and a tune, under the title "The Sinner's Redemption". Pete eventually offered the material to folk trio Artisan from Yorkshire. Enquiries by a former church organist uncovered the fact that a very similar version of the carol can easily be found in the New Oxford Book of Carols.*



Plain octagonal font, perhaps of c.1400. A painted coat of arms of James II, dated 1685. Other internal furnishings including Gothic box pews, are of 1868.<sup>4</sup>

### **Churchwarden's Report**

Writing this annual report becomes a time for reflection and review. When I came into post at the end of 2019 I hadn't attended church for many years, the Vicar was leaving to lead a new parish and the churchwarden resigned, we were not only 'in vacancy' but were unable to hold services with communion and I had no-one to teach or guide me. This was followed by the challenge that Covid brought in March 2020 and subsequent church closure, it cannot be denied that at times there appeared to be an amalgamation of events preventing the start of raising the church's profile back into the community it served. The last four years has been a steep learning curve and despite these and ongoing challenges we continue to move forward in a positive mindset following the arrival of Rev. Eric Falla who supports and guides us through the ups and downs on our journey doing our best to ensure the building is here for future generations.

This year's summary has been a very simple one regarding the fabric of our church, we have much to do, namely fundraising, applications for grants, organisation of contractors to address the great urgency to commence the identified work needed regarding the East Wall, alongside planning and implementing an annual maintenance plan.

In August 2024 it will be 155 years since the church's last major refurbishment. In 1868, Rev John Jackson described the church *...In the course of years the church had been suffered to fall into so bad state of repair that it became absolutely necessary that something should be done. Both roof and walls were in a dilapidated condition, and it was very easy to suggest alterations in the internal arrangement of the church which would greatly conduce to the comfort and convenience of the congregation*.<sup>5</sup>

This major refurbishment cost £300, equal to £42,514.38 today, of which Rev Jackson donated £90 and the churchwarden Mr Josselyn £50. It appears however that Rev Jackson was 'canny man' and decided to 'get in quick' to raise the money required for the refurbishment through a steep rise in church rates in the same year church rates were abolished, oh how I wish we still had this tax still today. We now find ourselves heading towards a very similar position if finances for work needed and maintenance are not raised.

Church finances are the ongoing concern for all PCC's, but much of the deterioration here could have been prevented over the years. The combination of at some point in time non-breathable paint being applied on the internal walls and a layer of concrete covering the exterior walls has resulted in walls that are unable to breathe which has resulted in internal areas of damp and deterioration particularly the south side Choir stall floor and north side back Victorian pews which has also not been helped by the raised soil levels specifically on the north side. Accessibility to the East wall to carry out any assessments or maintenance is also a challenge due to the boundary line from the Old Rectory abutting the gable wall. Internally the PCC keen for the church to be used by its community outside of religious services and are planning for the removal of the rotten back pews by the font to allow a more community inspired space to hold coffee mornings and other events and is a PCC priority for 2024.

### **Grants and Maintenance Plan**

But what of the finances needed? I have attended some training events to learn the process of obtaining grants, however many grant applications require us to have 50% of the finances alongside a maintenance plan, because rightly no-one will invest if you do not have no maintenance plan.

I discovered our insurance company advertises one such plan called 'Maintenance Booker' but when contacted, they do not presently cover Suffolk. This lack of service in a county with such a significant level of Grade I and II listed churches is very frustrating. The maintenance plan is a PCC priority for 2024 but must be mindful that we need to source a contractor with the required credentials to work on Grade I listed buildings.

**Organ** In 2023 the PCC had the church organ professionally assessed for repair, the report highlighted that it was not financially viable. We are also unable to justify paying for an organist out of the money raised for repairs to the fabric of the church. The PCC therefore, took the decision to put the organ up for sale and if purchased the proceeds will be placed in the fabric fund and used towards the East wall repairs. We presently await a purchaser.

### **Bells**

The temporary securing of our smaller bell carried out by The Suffolk Guild of Bell Ringers in 2022 remains in situ. We presently do not have the finances to rehang due to works needed on the East wall but are lucky to still have one working bell.

### **Churchyard maintenance**

The churchyard remains large for such a small parish despite some of it being sold to The Old Rectory previously and continues to be difficult to manage despite a visit from Suffolk Wildlife Trust and a churchyard maintenance plan being implemented. Despite three years ago the Parish Council agreeing to the churchwardens request asking them to

<sup>4</sup> <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1251408> Church of St Mary, Little Blakenham.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001325/18680829/078/0006> Restoration of Little Blakenham Church, The Suffolk Chronicle; or Weekly General Advertiser & County Express. - Saturday 29 August 1868, p.6

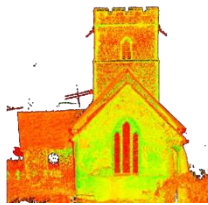
perform a cut and advertising for help from the community, the offers of help have been zero and work can only continue on this issue.

## **East wall**

Following an Extraordinary PCC meeting on 25<sup>th</sup> November 2021, due to the concern over the possible deterioration of the East Wall, The Diocese, Building Control and Planning and Historic England were all informed and the church was placed temporarily on the. "At Risk" Register.

On 6<sup>th</sup> December 2021 the PCC instructed G. B. Geotechnics Limited, Cambridge to perform an inspection and on 7<sup>th</sup> December 2021 Moire Tell Tales were attached both externally and internally and monitoring commenced to determine the buildings stability, specifically of the East wall.

The church was removed from the register just before Christmas 2021 and Tell Tales readings continued for a short time, via photographs uploaded to G B Geotechnics Limited who then interpreted and advised the PCC and interested parties accordingly.



The next phase of the project was removing the shrubbery belonging to the Old Rectory which abutted the East gable wall situated directly on the boundary line of the church and the Old Rectory. This was cleared on 8<sup>th</sup> July 2022 (seen in the photo) to enable a high definition 3D laser dimensional scan survey of the chancel interior and exterior, map cracks and process data for base dimension and tilt, so drawings and report could be performed.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2022 the final report from G. B. Geotechnics Limited was sent to the Diocese who forwarded to Edward Morton, a Conservation Accredited Engineer from The Morton Partnership Ltd to inspect and report further on the East Wall, he was met on the day by Rev Eric and all PCC members.

In Edward Morton's report he directed, *"...it is important to initially undertake two trial holes as this will give some greater knowledge and understanding particularly regarding the east wall. These should be excavated by hand down to the base of the foundation, one at the south end of the east wall and one to the north side of the north-east buttress. Ideally, some approximate levels should be taken from the east wall down to the courtyard area of the Rectory. This will allow a much clearer understanding of impact, if any, of the slope on the stability of the east wall. At the same time, it would be quite useful through ladder access to assess the masonry at high level to the east wall both internally and externally. This will hopefully provide better information about whether there is any voiding to the wall by tap testing, and also the stability of the internal masonry.... With the high-level inspection and trial holes completed, it may be found necessary to undertake further investigations such as boreholes and then soil testing to understand its characteristics – however, I would only suggest this is undertaken after the trial holes are completed... I suggested they would potentially need a faculty for any trial holes, and obviously they will need to engage a Structural Engineer to inspect. Any Engineer appointed should be conservation accredited under the CARE scheme, administered jointly by the Institution of Civil Engineers and the Institution of Structural Engineers."*

The increase in financial revenue through Eric's reintroduction of regular services and PCC fundraising events has enabled us to pay our parish share, insurance and electric bills and put some aside into our fabric account.

Although we are reconnecting through events with the community and presently find ourselves in a positive position financially, the PCC are fully aware we will need to be cautious with our public finances and need to use risk assessment in order to prioritise the most urgent maintenance and repairs needed with the assistance of grant applications.

## **2023 Priorities**

- Promote the Christian doctrine through regular services and reintegrate our church back into the community and beyond. - Ongoing
- To support and work in partnership with Reverend Eric Falla - Ongoing
- Promote and deliver fundraising events to the community to assist building relationships, friendships, and financial resources to aid our churches financial stability - Ongoing
- Continue addressing List, A items on the 2020 Quinquennial Report - Ongoing
- Maintenance plan and the employing reputable contractors to carry out - Ongoing
- the management of the East wall continues to be an ongoing high priority and will continue into 2024 and beyond.
- Contactless donations: we presently borrow Bramford's card machine and they then transfer any money taken into our account - Ongoing
- Regular Giving via Direct Debit mandate was not achieved in 2023 but will be included in the PCC meetings and rolled out in 2024.



- The PCC are working towards raising our profile with children and young adults and witnessed 7 children at the 2023 Christmas service. We are therefore planning to introduce child participation into the 2024 Christmas service and reassess.
- Encourage and welcome new members to our congregation, volunteers, and PCC.

### **2024 Priorities**

The PCC's main priorities for the next year are:

- Promote the Christian doctrine through regular services and reintegrate our church back into the community and beyond.
- To support and work in partnership with Reverend Eric Falla.
- Promote and deliver fundraising events to the community to assist building relationships, friendships, and financial resources to aid our churches financial stability.
- Continue addressing List, A items on the 2020 Quinquennial Report
- Maintenance plan
- East wall works
- Removal of rotten back Pews to enable a community space for Coffee mornings and events
- to improve the ability of the congregation/visitors to give contactless donations.
- Regular Giving via Direct Debit mandate was not achieved in 2023 but will be included in the PCC meetings and rolled out in 2024.
- To raise our profile with children and young adults
- Encourage and welcome new members to our congregation, volunteers, and new PCC members
- Appoint a new Accountant
- Appoint a new Architect

### **The Future**

The largest challenge to the PCC like everywhere, remains the designated Parish Share. Whilst the PCC supports and understands the expectation that parishes will make a pledge to pay a certain amount for the year, it is a fine balance when you are a small parish and the fabric of the village church needs major investment in order to remain open and safe.

The arrival of Rev. Eric has been a blessing and a breath of fresh air. Eric has made an immense difference both spiritually and financially to each of his parishes in the Benefice, through his passion, leadership support and working above and beyond the expectation of his role. The increase in financial revenue he has brought through the return of regular services and his support at fundraising events has not only enabled us to pay our parish share, insurance and electric bills, but also to put some finances into our church fabric account for maintenance, repairs and hopefully grant applications.

In summary, Eric has effectively dusted off the cobwebs of previous mindsets and enabled his PCC's and parishes to not only get to know and support each other but specifically steered PCC's to have autonomy and confidence in their ideas for enhanced growth in their parishes through his support and guidance.

Whilst we have many challenges ahead of us and will continually climb a very steep hill, the PCC and its volunteers remain positive when reflecting and reviewing our yearly achievements. We are positively reintegrating again with our community through village annual events such as the Woodland Garden Snowdrop Event and the PCC's annual Jumble Sale, Fete and Dog Show and Christmas Bazaar and especially the Christmas Eve service, which is reflecting our community's engagement and growth at staple events in the villages calendar. This growth and productivity however is also reflected in our nominated parish share which grows also. In 2022 our share was £1,000 rising in 2023 to £1,500 both of which we paid in full and there will be a further increase for 2024 due to our increased activity.

### **PCC and Volunteer Membership and Recruitment**

It must be acknowledged in this year's report that alongside finances it has been discussed among members our concern regarding our aging PCC and volunteer membership and who will continue our work when we are unable to continue due to our ages or ill health. It is recognised that without urgency to recruit new PCC members and volunteers there is a high risk that the church will be unable to continue with fundraising events, which in turn will only reflect further deterioration to the fabric of the building due to lack of finances and increase the risk of its closure in future years, leaving the village without a heart or spiritual care, it is a stark fact but reality and much recruitment promotion must be performed to address this issue by the PCC alongside existing volunteers.

Michele Kenningale  
Churchwarden, Secretary and Treasurer.

### **Finance**

We have no income from any lettings/rentals.

**Financial Statement**

Attached separately.