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STOTTESDON BENEFICE PROFILE

Welcome from the Archdeacon

Thank you for downloading and reading this profile – we're delighted that you have. The words you will read and the pictures you see capture the heart of this Benefice of six parishes in the northeast of our diocese. The profile is the fruit of much prayer and hard work and we hope that, as you prayerfully read it, you will sense whether God is calling you to come and serve Christ here among us.

The parishes are in good heart. Following the retirement of their most recent Rector, who was also the Rural Dean of Bridgnorth, the difficult decision has been made to reduce the post from 0.67 to House for Duty, but the parishes have accepted this reality with good grace and a determination to work more collaboratively among themselves and with their new Rector. The expectation is that the House for Duty Rector will offer Sundays plus two other days (or equivalent) per week.

Being part-time, the role would appeal to anyone who wishes to combine parish ministry with their own childcare or other caring responsibilities, or with academic study or a secular job, or just have a more even ministry-life balance.

As you will read, this collaboration is in some senses a new way of life for the parishes, but they are embracing it.

There are undoubtedly challenges ahead for the Benefice, with multiple beautiful buildings of national significance, and small village populations and congregations, but they are facing those issues with their heads up and full of hope, as well as being alive to the realities. As this profile says, the PCCs have a realistic understanding of their financial and existential challenges.

You will also read of the wonderful renovation project, recently completed, which took Stottesdon parish church from the Heritage at Risk Register to a secure future, as a warm, watertight building where people can gather to worship God, to explore the Christian faith, and to learn the history of this fascinating place. As the project manager put it, the building has gone from "a millstone to a milestone."

There are also signs of hope in other ways, as we have recently commissioned a new Lay Worship Leader in one of the parishes, with others coming forward to explore whether that might be how God is calling them to serve him and his Church in these parishes.



So please read this profile with the same combination of awareness of the realities and assurance of hope and know that we are praying for you as you read it.

If you would like an informal conversation about the parishes and the role, please do get in touch with me by email or phone – Fiona.Gibson@hereford.anglican.org or 01588 673571.

The Ven Fiona Gibson, Archdeacon of Ludlow

WELCOME TO THE STOTTESDON BENEFICE PROFILE

PART I: INTRODUCTIONS

1. Life in our parishes ‘west of the River’

Whilst bustling Birmingham and the West Midlands are just 40 miles to the east, our Benefice is in a very ‘different part of the world’ - with the two physically and culturally separated by the River Severn, an ancient boundary which, even today, has very few bridges into southern Shropshire. To the west, we are bounded by the Clee Hills (the highest in the county and rugged enough to feature on Hereford’s *Mappa Mundi*); beyond are the historically much-fought-over Welsh Marches, with imposing castles and lively market towns.

Nestled below the Clee, by-passed by the original turnpikes, and skirted by their successor ‘A’ and ‘B’ roads, the landscape is one of rolling hills (criss-crossed by stream valleys which feed the rains south into the Teme and east into the Severn). The countryside is one of hedgerows, old woodlands and a patchwork of pasture and arable fields – connected to the small villages, little hamlets, and scattered farms by a network of often tiny lanes and byways.

As in many parishes, the rural idyll must be tempered by the realities of social and economic deprivation; the impact of bovine TB; of car dependency born of no public transport; and a lack of employment opportunities and severe shortages of affordable housing for purchase and social accommodation to rent.

On the upside, our communities are strengthened by a steady churn of residents moving-in and becoming active participants in village and church life; school rolls are growing; and better broadband is leading to new means of working and new access to entertainment. The advisable “gentle” pace of travel is determined by free-range sheep traversing unfenced ‘common land’, some legendary potholes and seasonal farm traffic.

Our six church communities reflect the people and the parishes which they serve - each has a small core of willing volunteers; each is grappling the dual challenge of keeping the ‘listed roof’ watertight whilst providing pastoral care and striving for financial stability from small local populations and often tiny congregations. One is a ‘Festival Church’ and is informally sharing the model with two others which are exploring new ways forward.

2. Life as a Member of the Clergy in the Diocese of Hereford

The Diocese of Hereford is a place of contrasts. We're geographically large, but our population is small. We straddle six local authorities (Herefordshire, Shropshire, Worcestershire, Monmouthshire, Telford & Wrekin, and Powys) and two countries (England and Wales), but we are one Diocese with one Bishop. We are predominantly rural, with scattered communities, but we have a vibrant cathedral city, several historic market towns and post-industrial towns, and serve estate communities as well.

We are all committed, whatever our context, to our calling to make Christ known, to love God, one another and our neighbours, and to work for the common good. We do this not only through our churches but also through our church schools and academies which are an integral part of our Diocese. Our diocesan values are that we are prayerful, Christ-like, and engaged, and we seek to live out those values in our varying settings in a way that is rooted in the local.

We work collaboratively wherever possible, knowing that ministry brings unique demands as well as unique privileges. We are small enough (in terms of numbers) that clergy can get to know one another and the diocesan staff quite easily.

Recognising that, while ordained ministry is a joy and a privilege it can bring challenges too, we've recently launched an "Accompanying" programme where all incumbents in a new post, whether this is their first incumbency or not, are linked with a member of our Mission & Ministry team who will not only act as a mentor for the new incumbent, but work with them and their PCCs to help discern how God is leading them to work out the plans and hopes you'll read in this Profile.

If you would like to know more about life as a member of the clergy in the Diocese of Hereford, please get in touch with the Archdeacon of Ludlow (contact details on page 1)

3. Life in the Bridgnorth Deanery

Bridgnorth Deanery Chapter is looking forward to welcoming new colleagues. The Chapter is small and supportive. Most of the current Deanery clergy have taken up post in the last 12 months. We meet regularly and are working with the Deanery Synod and neighbouring deaneries on plans for the future of this rural area. The Deanery comprises seven benefices, with thirty-three parishes of predominately small ancient churches and faithful congregations.

PART II: THE BENEFICE DESCRIBED - FACTS, FIGURES, and OPPORTUNITIES

1. AN OVERVIEW OF THE POPULATION AND PARISHES WITHIN THE BENEFICE

The six parishes within the Benefice extend to 24.5 miles² and are home to some 1,600 souls [in 600 households]. This equates to a population density of just 66 people per mile² which, when compared to Shropshire's average (248) or England's (1,053), neatly describes the widely dispersed pattern of human habitation around our countryside. Unpicking the census data (see table below) reveals some strikingly different parish characteristics:

Stottesdon parish is largest among the six by area (13.6 mile²) and by population (787); Stottesdon village (±300 folk) is the principal settlement and is pretty much at the geographic centre of the Benefice. The population density of just *53 people per mile²* provides an excellent shorthand for the scattered communities and farmsteads which sit between the village and Chorley, an expanding, former farm and coalmine, hamlet.

To the south-west, Farlow parish is second by area (at just 3.9 mile²) and has 466 inhabitants - a much higher density (115/mile²) which reflects a large number of former 'squatters cottages' (for ironstone, lime and coal miners; brickmakers; and subsistence farmers) which are the basis of numerous smallholdings today. A similar industrial legacy is found in adjacent Cleeton St Mary which, along with neighbour Silvington, sits part within the 'Shropshire Hills National Landscape' (former 'AONB').

North and east lie Sidbury and nearby Middleton Scriven (together 3.2 mile²) with distinctly different population densities (25 and 90/mile² respectively) – a reflection perhaps of Sidbury's (untypical hereabouts) 'landed-Estate', tenanted housing stock.

STOTTESDON BENEFICE DEMOGRAPHICS

CofE 2018 dataset (based on the 2011 Census)

<u>PARISH</u>	POPULATION	households	AREA sq.miles	Pop density	aged>45
MIDDLETON SCRIVEN	87	45	1.2	90	58%
SIDBURY	50	21	2	25	50%
STOTTESDON	787	265	13.6	53	50%
FARLOW	466	177	3.9	115	53%
SILVINGTON	29	13	0.8	41	61%
CLEETON ST MARY	208	88	3	71	61%
BENEFICE [18/246BF]	1,627	609	24.5	ave: 66	ave: 56%

One 'nugget' from this data is the high proportion of over-45's in the population; like Shropshire overall, the Benefice has a higher percentage of over-65's than England's average – and a lower number of under-25's as well.

2. AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SERVICES, SCHOOLS AND SHOPS**

which help sustain daily lives in and around the Stottesdon Benefice:

The summary distances chart overleaf is designed to convey *a sense of the travel times and distances* for journeys (a) within the Benefice, and beyond to (b) local towns (c) regional centres and (d) for access to other parts of the UK and abroad.

This approach affords a more realistic perspective than a classic 'map view' of the Benefice, as travel from The Rectory is far slower than one might otherwise expect:

- (i) to the farthest-away church (Cleeton St Mary) is 6.5 miles or 20 minutes
- (ii) the cross-Benefice route (Cleeton to Middleton S) is 10.5 miles or 29 minutes
- (iii) to Cleobury (nearest 11-16 school, shops and petrol) is 5.5 miles or 12 minutes
- (iv) to bigger shops, and banks, at Bridgnorth is 9 miles or 18 minutes

Closer to home, within an easy walk of The Rectory, Stottesdon village provides three core facilities - to folk from around the Benefice – the Academy CE Primary School with integrated Nurse provision, 'The Fighting Cocks' Inn, and the busy (weekday mornings) Medical Centre.

Similar provisions 'around the patch' include Farlow's CE Primary School, the New Inn at Oreton, 'playgroups' at Farlow Village Hall and at Abkats and other privately run Nurseries, retail Plant & garden sales at Farlow Farm, and a range of meats, milk and groceries at Heath Farm (Stottesdon 1.5 miles). There are also Village Halls at Cleeton St Mary (shared with Silvington) and Chorley (3 miles east and shared by Stottesdon).

Secondary (11-16) education provider is Lacon Childe Academy in Cleobury Mortimer (though some 11-16's travel to Bridgnorth or Ludlow); for sixth form and other F.Ed, students travel further - to (Bridgnorth), Stourbridge, Ludlow, Telford, or Kidderminster.

Banks, Petrol stations, Post Offices and Supermarkets are available in the Local and Regional centres listed in the summary [*note Cleobury M. currently has no bank nor P.O.*] The 'market towns' (Bridgnorth and Ludlow) boast good independent shops; the 'regional centres' host the major chain-stores and comprehensive retail parks.

Leisure Centres are to be found in Bridgnorth, Highley, Cleobury Mortimer, and Ludlow; Swimming is available at Bridgnorth, Ludlow and the summer seasonal Lido at Highley's Severn Centre). Public Libraries are at Ludlow, Cleobury Mortimer, Highley and Bridgnorth; the Benefice is also served by a regular 'mobile library'.

There are small theatres and exhibition spaces in Ludlow and Bridgnorth (which additionally has an independent cinema). The Village Halls also feature Film Nights (Chorley), 'Arts Alive' live Theatre (Farlow) and other entertainments and fundraisers.

Local government in Shropshire is 'unitary', with services from roads to social care, and from recycling to planning control all under one-administrative-roof (in Shrewsbury).

The benefice covers part of 3 different electoral wards and 5 local parish council areas.

There are *Food Banks* and *Warm Hubs* in Bridgnorth, Cleobury Mortimer and Ludlow.

****A summary of web links to the above services, schools etc is at Appendix A on p24 >>>**


Table of distances/Journey times within and from the Stottesdon Benefice

[data from Google Maps]

BENEFICE		Stotty*	Sidbury	Farlow	M Scriven	C St M	Silvinton
Stottesdon*	MILES	2.5	3.5	4.0	6.5	4.5	
Sidbury	8		6.0	3.0	9.0	8.0	
Farlow	13	20		7.5	3.5	2.5	
M Scriven	12	9	22		10.5	10.0	
C St M	20	25	10	29		3.0	
Silvinton	15	22	10	25	10	MINUTES	

LOCAL		MILES	MINS	SHOPS	SCHOOL	TRAINS	HOSP
<u>from Stottesdon</u>							
Cleobury M.	5.5	12	Local	11-16	no	no	
Bewdley	9	17	Town	11-18	[Heritage]	no	
Bridgnorth	9.2	18	Town	11-16	[Heritage]	minor	
Ludlow	13	26	Town	16-18	National	minor	
Kidderminster	16	30	Town	16-18	National	minor	
Stourbridge	22	41	Town	16-18	National	minor	

REGIONAL		MILES	MINS	SHOPS	SCHOOL	TRAINS	HOSP
<u>from Stottesdon</u>							
Telford	22	38	Town	16-18	National	major	
Worcester	25	44	City	n/a	National	major	
Shrewsbury	28	48	'City'	n/a	National	major	
Hereford	36	58	City	n/a	National	major	
Birmingham	40	69	City	n/a	National	major	

NATIONAL +		MILES	MINS	DESTINATIONS and onward routes
<u>from Stottesdon</u>				
M54 J5	23	37	N Wales (A5); NW (M6)	
M5 J4	26	50	London (M40); NE (M1); S Wales (M50)	
BHX Rail Station	47	75	London (+UK wide via New St)	
 BHX	47	75	UK and International	

3. THE WORSHIPPING COMMUNITY

There is evidence of a long- and well-established Christian tradition in the Benefice, with – in addition to our six Parish Churches – three Methodist Chapels (at Oretton, at nearby Hopton Bank, and at Stottesdon (now closed)). The first of these has strong links to St Giles, Farlow. Like the Baptist Chapel at Chorley, these were probably established by, and to serve, the small mining communities of the 1800's CE.

There are also two flourishing Church Schools, at Farlow and Stottesdon, originally founded in that same period; both now share governance and resources with others – Farlow is federated with nearby Kinlet's Church School and Stottesdon is a member of the Shropshire Gateway MAT (based in Cleobury Mortimer). Each school has close two-way links with it's Parish Church; PCC officers are the elected Chair at Farlow and vice-chair at Stottesdon; The Rector is a Foundation Governor at the latter – with Cleobury Mortimer's equivalent holding that role for the Farlow and Kinlet Federation.

Our churches have hitherto provided a relatively fixed pattern of Sunday worship - anchored by a weekly service at Stottesdon - this has provided a monthly celebration of Holy Communion in every church (the single service of the month at Farlow and Sidbury) and with an extra service of morning or evening prayer at Cleeton and Silvington.

During the current vacancy, pragmatism and practicality led the PCCs to embrace a less intensive service pattern (which has greatly assisted with clergy cover and has quickly found favour with churchgoers) – Stottesdon's weekly anchor service continues and Cleeton/Silvington have elected to join the other two with a monthly Communion.

Middleton Scriven, as our one current 'Festival Church', offers six Festival-based services a year. It is home to our licenced Local Worship Leader, Ann, who during the interregnum has also supported worship in other smaller parishes.

All six parishes conduct the Occasional Offices on demand and each has an Open churchyard. Funeral Offices, and to a lesser extent Baptisms and Weddings, are usually significant events in the respective parish; these are mission opportunities – welcoming wider-community members into *their church* (and provide supplementary funding too).

Each parish hosts or participates in a range of 'happenings' and regular events across the calendar, with considerable wider-community involvement; for example –

- + Silvington's legendary Harvest Produce Auction;
- + Stottesdon's Community Fete (jointly with the School);
- + Farlow's Table-top sales (jointly with Melville Chapel and the Village Hall);
- + Sidbury's traditional Fete (jointly with the Sidbury Estate);
- + Middleton Scriven's' monthly Coffee Mornings and Community gatherings – in their "community building", a.k.a. the recently re-ordered church;
- + Cleeton St Mary have recently instituted a monthly Coffee Morning and a Knit & Natter gathering; plus sales events....spurred on by fundraising for church repairs.

In summary, "Never a dull moment" with lots of 'stuff' going on!

4. PARISH & BENEFICE RESOURCES/ORGANISATION

The six PCCs are as varied in size and arrangement as the Parishes they lead and the Rector is the only remunerated member of the team. Parish funding/finances are likewise differently derived and supported: some but not all have adopted the Parish Giving scheme for regular gifts; all collect Gift Aid on donations; many have ‘restricted funds’ in Trust for such as fabric and graveyard maintenance; Cleeton uniquely also has an Almshouse Trust (of which modern-day Rectors act as Chair).

The Parish Buying scheme is used for some cross-parish purchases, where it makes sense to pool costs and discounts for such as wafers, candles and communion wine. These are organised by two Stottesdon volunteers who also administer the ‘Benefice Fees Account’ for the collection and disbursement of Statutory and Local Fees.

As the collective Parish Offer (see Table below) has been below the minimum level needed to support clergy and housing costs, we have reluctantly acknowledged that a ‘house for duty’ arrangement is the only means by which we can sustain a clergy post. Covid-19 adversely affected parish incomes and recovery has been slow.

‘ACNY’ is used as the Benefice website, and together with ‘Wheatlands News’ – a monthly parish newsletter embracing the Severn Valley and Brown Clee Benefices too – is used for promotion of church services and events across much of south Shropshire. With contributions from the parishes, these are compiled and edited in Stottesdon.

Hitherto the PCCs have been entirely freestanding; however, each has valued the closer collaboration necessary ‘to keep the show on the road’ in vacancy; tasks have been shared in a positive and supportive way which suggests that new ways of working (possibly with a Benefice Council, for example?) could be well worth exploring....

COMPENDIUM OF MISCELLANEOUS SUPPORTING/CENSUS DERIVED DATA (based on 2011 Census)						
	POPULATION	? Inferred Christian pop	2019 return ave Sunday	££ Parish Offer	2024	Church Listed ?
MIDDLETON SCRIVEN	87	59	6	1500		Grade 2
SIDBURY	50	34	7	3200		Grade 2*
STOTTESDON	787	540	24	10000		Grade 1
FARLOW	466	317	10	5100		Grade 2
SILVINGTON	29	22	7	1600		Grade 2*
CLEETON ST MARY	208	150	6	0*		Grade 2
BENEFICE	1,627	1122	60	£21,400		

*church temp closed pending structural survey

5. MISSION, PLANS, PRIORITIES AND CHALLENGES

We strive to reflect the Diocesan vision – ‘proclaiming Christ, growing Disciples’ – in our Benefice mission, which, in broad terms, is to ensure that an active Christian presence is visible, welcoming and supportive in the diverse communities we serve.

We seek to achieve this with safeguarding at the heart of all that we do - to ensure a warm, reassuring welcome to all whom we encounter. We aim to open our church buildings daily – for quiet reflection, for prayer and for heritage visits; we mark major national events with community-wide celebrations in church (such as the late Queen’s funeral; the accession of the King; Remembrance Sundays); we actively invite people to linger after weekly and festival services and engage them with refreshment and friendly conversation.

Refreshments and ‘a good catch-up’ feature equally well in the Coffee mornings, ‘Knit & Natter’ happenings and ad hoc evening events in churches – some are well established in the social calendar; others are newly formed and growing in popularity.

We also host church visits by the schools and their extended families for the major festivals, and for ‘leavers’ services to mark the older pupils transition to “big school”. These events witness 2 and 3 generations of local families coming together in “their church” – much as the celebration of ‘Life Events’ traditionally sees large gatherings for baptisms, marriages and funerals in all six parishes.

The priorities and challenges for our churches are far from unique: we aspire to develop numerically and spiritually - whilst working on resources and funds to secure that growth, and to sustain the heritage estate of listed buildings entrusted to us by the nation.

Although experience tells us that none of this will be easy, we believe that appropriate leadership and a *good dollop* of optimism would make the task much more feasible!

6. THE RECTORY

Purpose-built in the 1960’s (an alternative to the former, rambling Victorian Vicarage) Stottesdon Rectory is a spacious detached house. It’s opposite the School and a couple of minutes from the Church by way of a back garden gate leading to the churchyard.

The ground floor has three large reception rooms (study, lounge, dining), a good sized kitchen with integrated oven and hob, separate utility room with storage space and W.C. with cloakroom. Upstairs there are four well proportioned double bedrooms, separate W.C. and family bathroom with shower over bath.

Externally, the ‘wrap-around garden’ has plenty of lawned space enclosed by fencing together with potting shed, vegetable patch and a small apple/pear orchard – fruit from which has featured at the annual village ‘Apple Day’ juice-making event!

The garage sits alongside the house, next to a side door access to the utility room. There’s a carport/covered area and parking for 3 cars within a gated driveway.

Images of Stottesdon Rectory



< Road frontage from the School opposite



Rear garden with footpath to church



< Chancel from across the rear garden

Kitchen looking to rear garden



Sitting Room looking to rear garden

7. THE RECTOR'S ROLE

The role is a flexible and multi-faceted one, working with the PCCs on the following:

- + spiritual and practical leadership of parish congregations and wider communities
- + capacity building - guide, lead and develop parish officers and lay leaders
- + work alongside and closely support leaders in our two Primary Schools
- + explore spiritual and numerical growth through community engagement
- + identify and provide or facilitate pastoral care and support to all in need
- + work up an outline, prioritised maintenance plan for Benefice buildings
- + review and co-ordinate Benefice-wide sustainability/organisation improvements

8. PERSON SPECIFICATION

We believe that these characteristics will help define our new Rector:

- + a sense of empathy, humour and humility
- + an understanding of rural traditions and the countryside
- + a caring, prayerful disposition
- + a facilitating rather than a directing leadership-style
- + an openness to and advocacy of new ideas and innovation
- + a team player and a team builder in equal measure

9. PARISH RESOURCES AND SUPPORTERS

The Rector will be actively supported by our volunteers and their helpers:

- + **MINISTRY:** we have a recently licenced Local Worship Leader and two Wardens who are developing worship-leading skills through the current Interregnum. A small cadre of retired clergy from nearby towns have supported the delivery of a modified pattern of Sunday services – and they seem likely to be available as we move forward.
- + **ORGANISATION:** managing vacancy clergy cover, and this recruitment, has challenged the PCCs to work more collaboratively and several new Officer-volunteers have come forward to support this very welcome development. A facilitated 'core team', drawn from each PCC, was formed to drive the Parish Profile process.
- + PCCs members have grown, through the Vacancy Consultation process, in their appreciation and understanding of the shared financial and existential challenges facing the Benefice as an entity.

10. 'PEN PORTRAITS' OF THE PARISHES >>>> >>>> >>>> >>>>

SILVINGTON

Silvinton [250m asl] lies in the Shropshire Hills 'National Landscape' (formerly 'AONB') at the foot of Silvinton Common, just below the Titterstone Clee Hill [533m] The farmland is mixed arable and pasture, with rough Common grazing.

Our current population is 38 having risen from 29 (1961 & 2011 census) with the arrival of a number of young families. [150 years ago, before farm mechanisation, the population was just under 60!] Of the current 38, 8 are retired, 7 are under 18 and the majority of the others work away from the village.

As the village has no 'facilities' or public transport, all trips and visits - to schools, shops, medical appointments, leisure and entertainment - involve the use of a car with a minimum round-trip travel of 9 miles. Even the shared Village Hall, up the hill at Cleeton, is a 6 mile return trip.

The church of St. Michael and All Angels, originally dedicated to St. Nicholas, has its origins in the Norman era and is set up on a lofty churchyard in the middle of the village. Listed Grade 2*, it was substantially rebuilt in the early 14th century although the font is believed to be 12th century. The adjacent Manor House may originally have been part of a monastery and has a rare double moat feature.



The last Quinquennial report raised a number of issues - some have been resolved but there are structural matters outstanding (pending discussion as to urgency and affordable solutions). Unfortunately, the individual handling these with the then Rector has also now moved away. We need advice and guidance to progress this.

In recent times, with two services a month, regular attendance has been 4 to 6 with the Festival services attracting over 30 to the congregation. The PCC numbers 3 and, following departure of a long serving colleague, the Wardenship is vacant.

Marking Life Events, such as the wedding below, sees the community gather to celebrate in the church, along with extended family members from far and wide.



Fundraising includes a well-established, successful Harvest auction following the Festival service on that Sunday, one or more Football orientated competitions for which a lottery licence is held and of course the 'plate' collections - particularly at Festival services. We have not hitherto adopted the Parish Giving Scheme.

Our most pressing challenges (aside from those building works) stem from the viability and sustainability of the Benefice; we look forward to working with the other parishes and our new incumbent to explore these opportunities further.

CLEETON ST MARY



Image: View towards Brown Clee from the churchyard.

Our Parish Community:

Cleeton St Mary is a tiny village [260m asl] built on common land situated on the north- eastern slopes of the Titterstone Clee Hill [533m]. The village is within The Shropshire Hills 'National Landscape' (formerly: AONB) and commands far ranging views across southern Shropshire. Mining was an important activity in this area until the mid-20th century. Whilst agriculture is still an important part of local life, recent years have seen new residents, with no farming connections, moving to Cleeton from elsewhere. As the village has no pub or shop, the village hall (shared with nearby Silvington) and St Mary's church are our only 'community' spaces.

Our village history:

Image: St Mary's Church with the Almshouses behind



Cleeton St Mary, as we see it today, is a relatively 'new' settlement. Initially established 1860-80 by the Rev'd George Pardoe, it consisted of St Mary's Church, four almshouses, a school and the Rectory. The creation of this new site shifted the focus of the village a mile south-eastwards from its former centre around Cleeton Manor.

Since late Victorian times the number of dwellings in the village has slowly increased, reaching it's current form by the late 1980's. There are also many dwellings, including former 'squatters' cottages, scattered over the extensive common land that surrounds the village centre.

Our Church Family:

Image: Coffee Morning in our church



St Mary's generally has a congregation of around 4 people; this swells fivefold for our Harvest and Christmas Festival services.

The fabric of the building is in a poor state (roof/Tower/cracks in walls) which led to the church being closed for the first few months of 2023 whilst structural surveys were undertaken - following this it was deemed safe to re-open and our inspecting Architect is preparing a modified repair schedule - which can be quoted against to price the remedial works and inform fundraising.

The PCC are now hosting new, regular activities such as a weekly 'knit and natter' and a monthly coffee morning. These have been well supported and a sixth member has recently been recruited to the PCC.

Miscellaneous observations:

1. We are not currently part of the Parish giving scheme but have recently installed QR codes to enable visitors and others to donate to church funds.
2. Our Rector is chair of the Pardoe Almshouse Trust, by virtue of office.

SIDBURY

Our Community

We are a small Parish, with about fifty people, and mostly comprised of the land that makes up the Sidbury Estate. As result, the Parishioners are largely made up of the Mayor family (who own the estate) and their tenants. The estate occupies a rolling landscape that is either farmed by the estate or occupied as tenant farms, plus a small number of largely scattered residential properties. Those people who do not farm, tend to be pretty aware about what's going on the land and woodland around us. At 150m asl, the village is in a less exposed location than most others in the Benefice. Recorded as 'Sudberie' in the Domesday Survey of 1086, traces of a deserted medieval settlement and ancient nut orchard adjoin the Parish Church.

Sidbury has not been subject to much new development, partly because almost all the land is owned by the Estate, and partly because its in a rural part of the county where planning permission will not be granted for new housing. A significant proportion of the houses are tenanted rather than owner occupied.

We are not a particularly affluent community but the village is very close-knit and everybody knows each other. It has quite a stable population, and we have several families with young children. As a result we seem to have a younger (than the average for the Benefice) population.



Sidbury folk variously work locally or from home and others away from here, with two or three farming families and several people who work in farming related, environmental, and construction related professions, and relatively few retired. Everyone gets on very well. Life in Sidbury tends revolve around the church as Holy Trinity is the only community facility; everyone tends to join in on community events, regardless of whether they have a faith.

We are quite diverse in terms of cultural background, with a good mix of people with local connections, people who have moved here, and several residents and their partners from families with connections outside the UK and from other parts of the world, and range of different religious beliefs and faiths.

We tend to visit and know people in nearby Stottesdon more than the other villages, because that's where we go to the primary school, the doctors surgery and the nearest pub! Lots of us dig our gardens or grow a lot of our own food, that we often swap and share around, with our produce including eggs, honey, apple juice, cider and lots of fruit and vegetables!

Our Parish Church

Church services, once a month, tend to be quite cosy, usually with no more than half a dozen people, but occasionally more. The church is a focus for people to get together, so even if people are not religious or don't have faith, or have a different faith, they do tend to come along from time to time. The Parish Giving Scheme is well supported.



The church is very small, much loved and in reasonably good condition.

MIDDLETON SCRIVEN

Middleton Scriven is a small rural village (131m asl) surrounded by farmland, small woodlands and rolling countryside. Farms are arable and with pastures for sheep and cattle. The Domesday Book records the settlement as 'Scriven Middeltone' but our simple *Early English* church in the village centre is of a later date: the Grade 2 listed building was restored by Sir Thomas Rowley, Head of Bridgnorth school, in 1845-46. Highlights include contemporary glass by David Evans and William Wailes; the stunning West window depicts St John the Baptist; the Norman-style font has an unusual palindrome and was restored to its original position in a recent reordering.

The Church shares access with Manor Farm and has limited car parking.

The last 3 years have seen significant change among village residents; whilst generations of some families have lived here, the population has recently shifted from several family units to more retired/near retirement age couples moving in. Approximately half of the families are working, half retired. There are a few school age children, and most households own at least one dog! Whilst it is appreciated that not everybody is a churchgoer/Christian, most members of our community live following the principles of Christian values and attitudes in caring, sharing, and supporting each other, valuing friendship and community. The Covid pandemic saw a great strengthening of community spirit and dialogue ('What's App' is amazing!).



Our church is open every day for private prayer, and is a valued community resource, even among non-churchgoers. Although congregations at regular services were small (2-3 on average), the local neighbourhood is all part of our broader church and village community. We have recently adopted the 'Festival Church' model; services include celebrations of Christmas, Easter, Harvest, as well as differing formats, such as Café Church and Songs of Praise. Close ties are maintained with nearby Glazeley church (in

the Severn Valley Benefice) at which we jointly host an annual joint Remembrance. We have a small PCC (of 3 members), and with the energy and enthusiasm of a small group of people we share the responsibilities of the church, its care and environment. Our churchyard is always accessible, is well maintained, and has availability of burial spaces. The roof was very recently repaired to secure slipping tiles and the West window was fully restored a few years earlier. The East window, depicting 'per crucem ad coelum', is now, sadly, in need of significant repair.

About 6 years ago, funds raised from the sale of a local shared village hall enabled a process of re-ordering of the Nave to take place. This included provision of a new floor, enabling our building to be on sound footing. Uncompromisingly uncomfortable Victorian pews have given way to new stackable chairs, tables, a small kitchen and useful storeroom, plus space outside for a mobile toilet.

This has created a very much more flexible and versatile community space and which doubles-up as our new "village hall". This is particularly important to us as there are no other amenities in the village, and our church provides a focal point for very well supported community events. These include monthly coffee mornings, annual Harvest Supper, Jubilee and Coronation celebrations, Lent Lunches, Plant sales and Afternoon Teas.

The Chancel remains unaltered, as in the background on this picture, an ever-present sacred space nurturing, and alongside, broader community fellowship.



STOTTESDON

Firstly, a quick word about the name: Stottesdon is derived from the Old English words *Stod* ('stud') and *Dun* ('hill') – thus "place with horses on the hill" (185m asl). Locally pronounced as '*Stoddesden*' and colloquially known to all as '*Stoddy*'.

Stottesdon is an extensive parish, embracing 48% of the Benefice by population and 55% by area. Most of the ground is pasture for sheep and cattle; cereals, corn and legumes are grown for fodder and rapeseed for oil. Smallholdings and modest family farms predominate, with a few larger arable enterprises and a small agri-engineering business or two dotted around. The Parish is home to 787 souls (2018); fewer than half live in the village; others live in neighbouring Chorley or are otherwise widely dispersed in the hamlets and farming clusters around the patch.



If the extent of the St Mary's Parish church (which can seat over 250) seems larger than that needed to serve a small village and a scattered rural parish, we can turn to history for explanations:

A Hundred History

In early medieval days the Counties subdivided into smaller 'Hundreds' - powerful local areas with their own courts of justice, markets and armed forces (militia). So, the scale of the church (and the number of modifications and extensions undertaken during its first millennium) is one result of the status of Stottesdon as the '*caput*' (*market and administrative centre*) of the Anglo-Saxon 'Condertree Hundred' which then governed most of modern-day south-east Shropshire.

By 1086 the population here is recorded, in The Domesday Book survey, as being 50 households – a remarkably large number meaning that the settlement here was among the *largest 20% of all the places* recorded anywhere in England. We can guess just how

valuable Stottesdon was -to the new Norman rulers who ordered the survey- because the manor here was personally given to Roger de Montgomery by none other than King William (as a reward for [his cousin] Roger's loyal service in having stayed at home to guard Normandy when William set sail in 1066 to successfully conquer England!

Soon afterwards, Roger was made Earl of Shrewsbury and became one of the most powerful nobles in all the land. In his turn, Roger, who founded the Abbey at Shrewsbury, gifted Stottesdon village to the abbot - as a source of income!

Stottesdon's pre-eminence was thus assured despite the change of king; in 1244 William's distant successor Henry III issued a Royal Charter allowing a weekly Market on Tuesdays (in *The Bull Ring* and *The Square* – road names that have long-outlived the market). The nearby church was surely the community meeting place and it's porch-altar a cash settlement point on those market days?



The (Market) Square, Stottesdon looking west

Decline and Development

Over the next centuries, the neighbouring market town - Cleobury Mortimer - grew more successfully, and Stottesdon slowly declined. Thus the Parish Church is the last clue in the built-environment of the former importance of the village. Then, as farm mechanisation took hold after WW1 the local population declined – and landholdings were combined to form larger units, more easily worked by machines, such that now just two of seven working farms remain within the village boundaries.

Former barns, wainhouses and farmsteads have been repurposed as modern dwellings – most can be identified by their tell-tale farming names. Other new housing has been added over the last century too – with affordable and social rental housing on Station Road, at Glebe Drive and The Kinsleys, along with some infill development of commercial housing on pasture lands once part of the Coulraine and Manor Farms.

These developments have supported and sustained thriving village services, including a busy Health Centre, The Fighting Cocks public house/eatery; Heath Farm Meats, at Bagginswood, retail home-reared meats and a range of dairy products and other provisions. The village CE Primary has grown from threatened closure to an Academy School and integrated Nursery with over 100 on roll.

With the Rector an ex-officio Foundation Governor, the School and Church collaborate closely – with ‘Open the Book’ jointly provided with the Baptist Chapel team from Chorley, with vicar-led School Assemblies, with a jointly provided Community Fete each summer, and with termly and other School services in church (the only space big enough to host whole school events - with extended families joining in for such as Nativity and Harvest celebrations).



Living Heritage, Governance and Volunteering

St Mary’s, Grade 1 Listed and on the Heritage at Risk Register, underwent a massive Lottery funded repair and conservation programme overseen by the Secretary and Warden in 2022-23. The building is now waterproofed, properly drained, dry-rot free and has improved heating and lighting. It is officially no longer ‘at risk’ and is welcoming new visitors and students – with newly devised interpretation media – and, in the coming months, new audiences for community events and entertainment.

The PCC has 8 members and meets quarterly. The Parish Buying, Parish Giving and Gift Aid schemes are widely used to optimise generous giving; all appreciate that the



finances are challenging - nowhere more so than in meeting our Parish Offer. The regular congregation is 20-25 and the majority of members are retired. Small volunteer groups formed to take responsibility for Cleaning, for Refreshments on Sundays and High days, for Heritage tours and visitor welcome, for Flower displays, and last *but no means least* for bellringing and bell maintenance.

The Tower Captain and team are currently funding and managing the repair of the Treble bell – the last item in a long running restoration project designed to secure the future of full-circle ringing of our Heritage Peal of four bells (which date back to the 1550’s).

Our Parish and Community



Over 450 people live here, making Farlow the second largest in the Benefice by population, and coincidentally by area too. Folk are clustered in one of two villages, Farlow and Oreton, and in scattered hamlets and isolated cottages throughout the area. The topography is decidedly hilly, with the Parish Church and its CE Primary School next door commanding fine views to the Brown Clee Hill and The Wrekin from their ridgetop position at 230m asl.

St Giles Church – “the church that moved up the hill” - is a delightful Victorian replacement for an earlier chapel that fell into disrepair; this was some way off,



down the notorious ‘Farlow Bank’. Our regular congregation numbers around 10 who gather for a monthly Eucharist.

Close ecumenical ties are maintained with the Melville Methodist community in Oreton – who support Open the Book at the school.

The joint annual BBQ service held at the Village Hall is a firm favourite in peoples’ diaries, and attracts visiting preachers to share a sermon and a sausage or two!

The windswept upland Catherton Common (which lies twixt Farlow and Cleeton St Mary) is a significant Nature Reserve managed by the Shropshire Wildlife Trust – and extensively grazed by the commoners’ sheep. Other sites of interest to the naturalist abound – with Cramer Gutter an SSSI and the Rea valley teeming with interesting flora and fauna. There are numerous public rights of way and with the hilly terrain much to challenge the cyclist too.

The small PCC is active and regularly shares fundraising events – such as table top sales, a summer fete etc – with other local organisations, usually at the Farlow and Oreton Village Hall, which incidentally hosts the local playgroup and periodically puts on Arts Alive and similar drama performances.

Smallholdings, shepherding and forestry trades are the main occupations for those who don’t commute away to work. Farlow Farm Nursery is splendid for garden plants, homegrown shrubs and trees – and right on the doorstep!

APPENDIX A – LINKS TO LOCAL RESOURCES, SERVICES, SCHOOLS &c

Local Market Towns and places of interest

LUDLOW	ludlow.org.uk
BRIDGNORTH	visitbridgnorth.co.uk
CLEOBURY MORTIMER	cleoburycountrylife.com
STOTTESDON & DISTRICT	Facebook: 'Stottesdon Community Group'

Schools

FARLOW PRIMARY	farlow.shropshire.sch.uk
STOTTESDON PRIMARY	stottesdon-school.co.uk
LACON CHILDE SECONDARY	lacon-childe.org.uk

G.Ps. and Medical Centre

BROWN CLEE PRACTICE	browncleesurgery.com	Incl. Stottesdon Surgery
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The Benefice

STOTTESDON BENEFICE	achurchnearyou/church/10731 (Incl Parish Magazine, Safeguarding etc)
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Local Government services

SHROPSHIRE COUNCIL	Shropshire.gov.uk	(Libraries, Recycling, Roads etc)
STOTTESDON P C	stottesdonpc.co.uk	
FARLOW P C	farlowparishcouncil.org.uk	

