

Ashby St Mary Parish Council - Annual Meeting 23rd April 2015

Report on behalf of Ashby St Mary Church

Thank you very much for voting to pass this cheque on to Ashby St Mary church, and of course thank you to Anglian Water, who decided so promptly that some recognition needed to be made following the loss of water supply last Christmas. I am sure we all appreciated our £20 rebates too.

This cheque comes with conditions attached that fit well with our plans. We are acutely aware that St Mary's church is the only community facility we have, and, although it has been quite well suited to church services for the last 1000 years, we have ambitions to make it a more generally useful building for the community as a whole.

To that end, as some of you will know, some years ago we cleared away some furniture at the East end of the building to make an open space for performances of various kinds. Since then we have enjoyed visiting choirs, classical recitals, student performances, jazz bands, and so on, many times. The space has also made it possible to conduct weddings and funerals with more dignity, and many people in the community still value the church for these purposes even though they may come at no other time.

Large attendances bring their own challenges of course, and several years ago we installed a chemical toilet in a disused building at the back of the church. This is just about adequate for low levels of use, but a proper flush toilet with washing facilities is an early intention.

We also need to be able to offer modest refreshments in conditions that satisfy modern hygiene requirements, and to that end our larger vision is to build a new structure on the north side of the church, the side furthest from the road, that would house a kitchen and small meeting room as well as the new lavatory. The memory of the choir that came from Grimsby and found themselves changing in the churchyard and using a chemical loo inside a risky flapping tent haunts us still, as does the queuing outside neighbouring houses in the interval by ladies desperate for a pee.

It's often said that more people in this country still go to church on each Sunday than go to football matches on a Saturday. But the fact is that here in Ashby we have 22 names on the electoral roll, and typically at any one time slightly more than half of those appear on a Sunday. It is also the case that the average age of regular attenders is probably twenty years older now than it was twenty years ago. The generation who will keep things going when we are too decrepit is not there. We are not alone in this of course. Keeping a job these days leaves people less personal time than ever, and the village halls, not to mention parish councils, all face difficulty finding people who will volunteer for responsibility.

Every year the Ashby church congregation has to find about £12,500 to carry on. It costs over £1000 each year just to insure the building for public use. Two thirds of that £12.5k is our share of having a vicar, and the last eight months since Peter Knight left have shown what happens when there is no one. His successor, Chris Ellis arrives in early July.

- Typically a quarter of this annual £12.5k comes from regular promised giving, offered by people most of whom seldom come to church but do not want to see it close.
- Another quarter comes from Sunday offerings;
- our fund raising events supported by the village raise another quarter,
- and, though the Gift Aid scheme, HMRC proved nearly another quarter.

But about a third of our regular attenders come from outside the village, and if they chose to attend a church closer to home we would be at some risk.

That said we are in a relatively good state. Ashby church is as well attended, if not better, than at any time in the last fifty years. I understand that the church in Cantley is about to be mothballed, and in a county with a large number of medieval churches this is likely to be more common. However a redundant, potentially ruinous, church is never a good sight, and I suspect few of us would be happy driving past a shuttered and neglected Ashby church. That is why we are planning for a future that includes a wider range of uses for the building, and to which this cheque is such a welcome contribution.

Arnold Miller 23/4/2015