

Diocese of Ely  
Church of St Mary, Whittlesey  
In the Benefice of Whittlesey, Pondersbridge and Coates

## STATEMENT OF NEED



*Top Left to Right: Sunday Worship; Worship Wednesday;  
The Whittlesey Festival in the Churchyard; The Christmas Tree Festival.*

# SECTION ONE: ABOUT ST MARY'S, WHITTLESEY

## General Information

St Mary's, Whittlesey has a parish population of approx. 8,709,<sup>1</sup> although the wider town of Whittlesey - including the neighbouring parish of Whittlesey: St Andrew - has a population of 14,633.<sup>2</sup> (2021 census). Whittlesey also has a number of new housing developments currently being built or seeking planning permission.

St Mary's is located in the centre of Whittlesey and, partly due to its spire which towers over the town, it is well known and cherished by the people of the area. On a number of occasions throughout the year - including Straw Bear Festival, BusFest, Whittlesey Festival, Scarecrow Festival and our own Christmas Tree Festival - we welcome the community into the church for tea/coffee/cake. St Mary's also hosts a number of concerts throughout the year, for which we currently have to hire a Port-a-loo for the weekend at some cost.

St Mary's hosts a number of wedding and funeral services each year. Last year, there were four weddings held at St Mary's and there are seven weddings booked for this year. There were also 24 funeral services held in St Mary's last year. St Mary's regularly welcomes in our three primary schools at Christmas for their Christingle and Carol services as well as for various educational visits throughout the year.

## Our Congregation

There are currently **55** on the electoral roll of St Mary's and in 2023 there was a usual Sunday attendance of **28**; 25 adults and 3 children. Our congregation is a mixture of ages and over the past year we have been on a journey of discovery as we've sought to embrace a more intergenerational style of worship.

St Mary's hosts a small number of mid-week services. Our mid-week Holy Communion service<sup>3</sup> and our (now monthly) Worship Wednesday service both have an average attendance of **12**.

## Our Building - an Overview

Until the 1990s St Mary's had use of a hall nearby which was used for a Sunday School, meetings and other church events. When the lease for the land expired the owner did not renew it. There are no other buildings in the vicinity of the church that could serve as a church hall.

St Mary's regularly welcomes the community into our church building for occasional services and community events, but our current lack of any toilet or kitchen facilities can make this difficult. Hospitality is a big part of our church community's ethos but this is currently hindered by our lack of facilities; for example, like a number of churches now, we offer hospitality before our Sunday service as well as after - but some are unable to partake in this before the service, knowing that they cannot access toilet facilities easily.

As we continue to explore what our worship and church life might look like now and in the future, we have taken steps at St Mary's to embrace more contemporary and more intergenerational styles of worship. This is somewhat hindered by the fixed pews at St Mary's which leaves us with an inflexible worship space.

We currently use some moveable screens for much of our worship, and with any building project we hope to consider investing in more of an integrated Audio-Visual System. Currently the placement of one screen in particular is made difficult with the placement of our fixed pews and the view of the front of church can be a little obscured for some.

Our last Quinquennial Inspection (2022), and subsequent investigations, have identified some work that needs doing to the roof of the nave. We are aware that this in itself could be at some cost and would wish to include these works in our wider plans for the reordering and development of St Mary's Church.

St Mary's has some reserves (c. £80,000 in 2023) and this may go some way towards the work needed for the roof. To fund the rest of the project we will be seeking grants and fund-raising. We are aware that we may need to separate our hopes for the development of the church building into a number of phases.

<sup>1</sup> 2021 Census - ARCGis Map

<sup>2</sup> 2021 Census - ARCGis Map

<sup>3</sup> This is held at St Mary's in the summer/autumn months but moved to St Andrew's for the coldest months of the year as St Andrew's is more cost-effective and easier to heat.

## SECTION TWO: IDENTIFYING OUR NEEDS

**Toilet Facilities:** St Mary's currently has no toilet facilities. We are often asked by those visiting the church - whether for community events, occasional offices or school visits - whether they can use our toilet and we have to explain that we don't have one. There are public toilets located besides the car-park outside St Mary's, but these are often locked and not-in-use. The nearest toilets are then found in the Wetherspoons pub on Market Square (2 minute walk away), but this is not always ideal - for example, during a school visit to the church or if our visitors are disabled, or in the case of families with a number of young children.

We know that our complete lack of toilet facilities can currently prevent some from worshipping with us and visiting St Mary's; particularly for the disabled and those who require better access to facilities for health reasons.

**Kitchen Facilities:** St Mary's, like a lot of churches, regularly serves tea/coffee etc before and after our worship. There are a number of occasions throughout the year when we welcome the local community into church for refreshments during local community events. We are currently reliant on our self-built Coffee Bar - but this involves us trying to operate a filter coffee machine

and kettle/urn using a single extension lead. We are also without any washing-up facilities (the church only has a soak-away sink located in the vestry) which means we have to use disposable cups/stirrers etc and we are aware that this is not the most environmentally friendly.

**Our Pews and Flooring:** Currently our fixed pews throughout the length of the nave, along with the raised platforms they sit on and the uneven flooring with the heating grates and carpeted areas can create a number of trip hazards and does not make St Mary's the most accessible space for our disabled visitors. If we were able to replace these pews with an open and flexible space and level floor, this would allow us, and the wider community, to use the church building in new and different ways.

Christian worship has changed significantly since the Victorian era and at St Mary's we have been looking to embrace more contemporary and intergenerational styles of worship to suit all ages within our church community.



Currently this is somewhat hindered by the placement of our fixed pews throughout the length of the nave. This makes it difficult to cultivate any worship which doesn't involve sitting in rows and facing the front - for example, for those moments in our worship when we gather into smaller groups, interactive prayer activities or café-style worship when we might gather around tables. Our pews currently sit on raised platforms. For our ministry and mission, we would like a flexible level

flooring at St Mary's and stackable chairs which would mean we could adapt the space for different services of worship and community events.

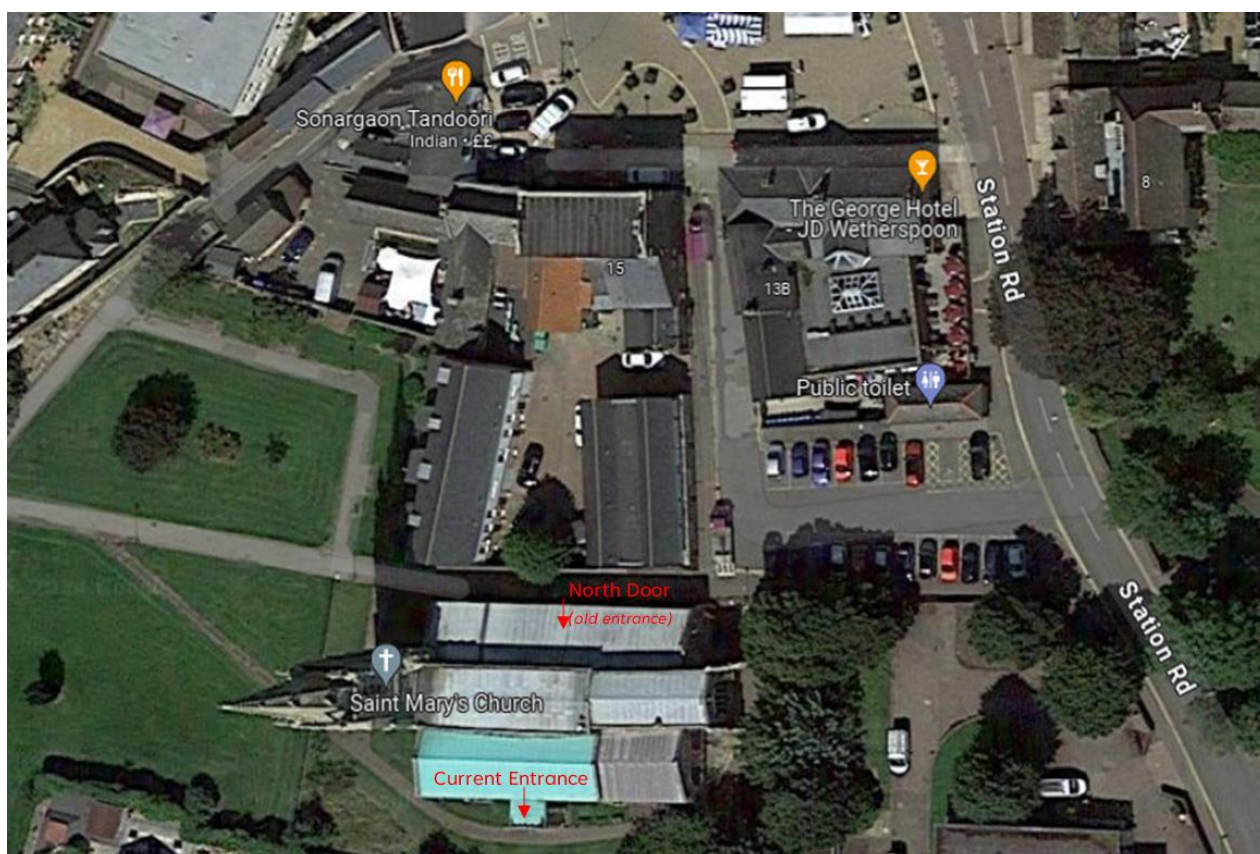
Since the loss of St Mary's Church Hall in the 1990s (when the lease expired), we have been greatly limited in the mission and ministry we can offer as a church community by the inflexibility of our building. We would love the opportunity to explore different ministries and community projects, such as a baby/toddler group or youth café, and how we can make better use of the building in our local community - through the hosting of more community events.

There are a number of occasions each year when St Mary's welcomes in a considerable number of visitors. Besides some of our occasional offices, these include a number of concerts each year, as well as local events such as the Straw Bear Festival and Whittlesey Festival. Currently the number of people we can accommodate at some of these events are limited by the presence and positioning of the fixed pews.



An open and flexible space would enable the St Mary's church community to better worship in different ways and would provide many more opportunities to open up the building for the local community.

**Entrance to Church:** Historically the main entrance to St Mary's has been through the North Door, but this was changed some time ago to the South Door which was adapted to provide a step-free and accessible entrance. This does involve those approaching St Mary's to effectively walk around to 'the back' of church to gain entry. As we seek to reimagine St Mary's for the present and future generations, we would like to at least consider how we might better welcome people into St Mary's.



*Google Map of the Church: showing local toilet facilities (in the public toilet - when in use - and at the George Pub as well as the old and current entrance to the church.*

Currently at our main entrance, visitors are met by a large wooden door. We would love to consider whether a more transparent doorway into St Mary's might more welcoming and less intimidating for those who visit.

**Meeting Room:** We would like to consider whether any new plans for St Mary's might include a partitioned meeting/small room which could be independently heated. Currently, if a small number of us are gathering in St Mary's during the colder months - whether for a mid-week Holy Communion service or for a church meeting - our only option is to attempt to heat the entire church building (or freeze). It would be ideal if this room could also be used by our children during our times of worship.

**Parish Office:** We have four church buildings within our Benefice, as well as a Parish Hall at St Andrew's, but none of these buildings currently include a Parish/Benefice Office space. Historically, the Incumbent's personal study in the Rectory/Vicarage has been used as a Parish Office, but this hasn't been the case for some time. An office space would help the administration of our Benefice. It would also mean we could potentially hire a part-time administrator or other ministry/church workers - and provide a space for them to work in.

**Heating:** If we are to remove our pews at St Mary's, we would need to reconsider our current heating system as some of our radiators are currently placed alongside the pews. It might be that another heating system would be more efficient and cost-effective for St Mary's; or that the existing radiators would need to be moved. We would be looking for advice on this.

**Audio-Visual System:** The sound system we currently use is quite historical and does not meet our current needs as a church. A number of our church congregation with hearing difficulties can struggle with the quality of our current sound system and the temporary radio microphones that we currently use. We would be looking for a sound system which made our worship, occasional offices and community events much easier to access for the hard-of-hearing.

We use screens for much of our worship and these are currently located on trolleys (so they can be moved if need be). If we are to re-imagine St Mary's, we would like to consider a new audio-visual system which better meets our needs as a worshipping community.

One of the reasons that St Mary's is not currently left open unattended is because of our worry about the potential theft of our screens (and other temporary equipment, such as our radio microphones). If we had a properly installed AV System, this might mean that we could more securely leave the church open for private prayer during the day when otherwise not in use.

**Environmental Impact:** We are aware of the Church of England's aim to become Net Zero by 2030. As a Grade I listed building we are conscious that we are somewhat limited in what we can do to help reach this target; but we are considering whether the installation of solar panels on the roof might help us to reduce our carbon footprint - and save on our longer term energy bills.

## SECTION THREE: RE-IMAGINING ST MARY'S

As we look to discern how we might re-imagine St Mary's to better serve the needs of its current - and future - worshipping and wider community, we feel we would need to take the following into consideration:

### Welcoming the Community into St Mary's



*Current Entrance  
(South Door)*

At the moment, the entrance to St Mary's is found 'round the back' and the way into church can be hard to find for visitors. When you reach the main entrance to St Mary's you are met by a large wooden door and whilst we generally leave this open during the warmer months - along with the North Door - in the winter we have to keep this closed to make efficient use of our heating.

Historically, the main entrance to St Mary's was through the North Door, which is situated on the main walkway which provides access to the churchyard. However this entrance - whilst easier to find and reach from the outside - has a number of steps which have worn uneven over time, making it an unsuitable access point for the less able and disabled.



*North Door - external view*



*North Door - internal view*

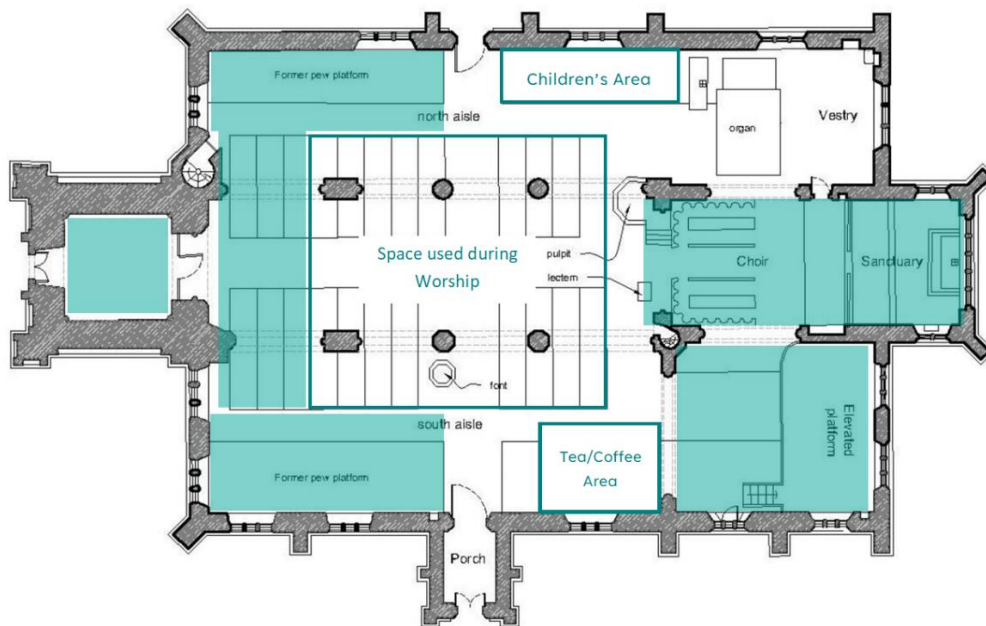
We know that the current main entrance to St Mary's is not the most obvious and how daunting it can be walking into a church building for the first time. We would seek advice from our architect on whether a more practical and accessible entrance to St Mary's could be found - either by adapting the entrance at the north door or the west door.

How can we better welcome our community into St Mary's in an accessible and less intimidating way?



## Making the most of our space....

One of the concerns raised during this process of discernment has been the need to maximise the use of space in any reordering plans. Whilst we use a relatively small section of the church footprint for our regular worship and church activities, we do occasionally host occasional offices with an attendance of c. 200+. Could we make better use of the space that we have? If we are to install toilet/kitchen facilities and potentially other rooms, this will inevitably take up space. The need for good storage space and storage for chairs etc will also take up space. Could we make use of a second floor or mezzanine floor to maximise our use of space?



*Our use of Church Space for our regular worship - note the green spaces which is generally unused space.  
As we re-imagine St Mary's, how can we make better use of our space?*

## Sir Harry Smith Chapel

One area that might require particular thought is the South-East corner in which the Sir Harry Smith Chapel is situated. This is a particularly dark corner of the church and seldom used by the current church community - except as a storage space.

Sir Harry Smith is a notable figure locally and his memorial sits just to the right of the stairway to the (former) chapel. We still have a number of visitors who come to see where Sir Harry Smith was educated.

This chapel sits on an elevated platform above the boiler room. Historically it has been used as a school room and then as a chapel, but this area ceased to be used as a chapel some time ago as the stairway and the raised platform on which the pews once sat were felt to be a trip hazard and inaccessible for some of our less mobile worshippers.

How could we make better use of this space?





*The South-East corner of the Church, showing the elevated platform on which the Sir Harry Smith Chapel sits.*



*The Sir Harry Smith Chapel.  
A memorial to Sir Harry Smith can be seen in the top right corner - to the right of the stairway.*

*To be completed once plans have developed further....*

- *Brief for Architect*
- *Feasibility Study*
- *Plan, Drawing and Photographs of Proposal*
- *Explain processes we have gone through to reach this decision*
- *Business plan for how the project will be run*

## **SECTION FOUR: ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY**

*To be completed once plans have developed further....*

## SECTION FIVE: THE VISION

The church community of St Mary's has spent some time in 2023 discerning our values, hopes and vision as a church. These proposals would enable us to better live out these values and to better grow into the church community - with the outreach - that we feel God is calling us to be. Some of these core values that we hold as a church community are:

### Hospitality and Welcome



We hope to give everyone who walks into St Mary's a warm welcome that reflects something of the love of God. We also hope to be generous with the hospitality that we offer. Currently this is somewhat hindered by the lack of toilet and kitchen facilities, as discussed elsewhere in this document. At the present moment are very reliant on the use of the Vicarage for the hosting of Alpha Courses and Bring and Share Lunches, for example. We are aware that not all Incumbents would be able to open their home up to the church community as much as our present Incumbent does, and it would be ideal if we were able to host some of these things

in our church building. The facilities proposed in this statement of need would enable us to offer as a church a better welcome and greater hospitality.

### Being an Intergenerational Church

We are aware that Christian worship and Church Life has changed significantly since the Victorian era and continues to change today. As a church we would love to explore different styles of worship that we might develop and grow as a truly intergenerational community of faith. The lack of flexible space - as well as a lack of toilet and kitchen facilities - currently hinders this vision.

How we welcome and include our children and young families within our worship and church life forms an important part of this vision. Currently, like a lot of churches, we have a 'Children's Corner' and this provision has developed over the past year - but we would love to consider how we might include the needs of our children and young people in any reordering plans. Might the partitioning of a small room give them their own dedicated space - and help them to feel that St Mary's is just as much their church as any adults?

### Reaching out to our community with the love of God

We would love to better reach out to our community with something of the love and compassion of God. We are aware that other churches are able to demonstrate this in ways that currently we are unable to; for example, by hosting community café spaces, by accommodating foodbanks or food pantries, by running Baby/Toddler groups or free services/clubs/advisory sessions to help others in need. Toilet and kitchen facilities, as well as

a more flexible space which was better or more efficiently heated would greatly enable us to develop the Christian outreach and care we would love to share with our local community.

## **SECTION SIX: WHY NOW?**

- As a church community we are not able to offer the basic level of hospitality and welcome that we feel is necessary in providing visitors to the church building access to toilet facilities.
- The current arrangements though which we offer hospitality is not sustainable or eco-friendly and we need access to better kitchen facilities.
- The existing plan and fabric of the church, specifically the fixed pews and unlevel flooring, prevent the church community from worshipping as they would like to and limit the use of the church by the wider community.
- The current lack of any Parish/Benefice office space is not practical in the longer term.
- Our current Audio system no longer meets our needs and our current Visual system has been set-up as a temporary measure until something more permanent and integrated can be installed.
- We need a church building which reflects the warmth of welcome and hospitality that we feel is a core value of our church community. This includes: a building which is comfortably warm in colder months and a doorway which entices people in rather than acting as a barrier.

## **SECTION SEVEN: WHO WILL BENEFIT?**

Further evidence can be provided for this in due course, but the following will benefit from a re-imagined St Mary's Church:

- The Church Community
- All who visit St Mary's for a Baptism/Wedding/Funeral
- All who visit St Mary's during local community events, including: The Straw Bear Festival, BusFest, Whittlesey Festival, Scarecrow Festival, Christmas Tree Festival.
- Those who attend the various concerts currently hosted in St Mary's throughout the year
- Our local primary schools who visit for school services and educational visits



We are planning to reserve further consultation of our wider community until we are able to present some initial architectural ideas.

February 2024