

## **Team Rector's Review for the APCMs of Bladon and Woodstock 2014/15**

This is a review with a view: for as I write I am looking out of the window. Snow-covered Swedish fields pass by as our train speeds from Jönköping to Malmö. Michael Holmes and Gill Morris have been with me on a trip to the parish of Gränna in our companion diocese of Växjö, exploring the possibilities of making a formal link between them and Woodstock. Seeing the work of the Church of Sweden has provided a fresh sense of perspective on our own life and ministry; and makes me all the more thankful for the blessings and grace of God with which our parishes have been showered over the last twelve months.

Let's begin where last year's review ended. Lent was a rich time of reflection and worship. It was poignant in community terms, as we gave thanks to God for the lives of two great servants of the church here, Kerr Elliott and John Womersley. Our annual meetings went well, and in Woodstock many new faces were welcomed to the PCC. Somerville College choir sang Bach's St John Passion at Woodstock. The first Diocesan clergy conference for many years was held at Swanwick, followed by my pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Then came the Passion Play. Who could have imagined that it would be such a spiritually moving and powerful event? One thousand stood and watched a great team of cast and crew bring the final week of Jesus' life on earth into the heart of Woodstock. As someone said to me recently 'I didn't have a very good view of the crucifixion scene, but then I realised that I could see everything just by looking at the faces of those who stood watching' – that's fine theology, as well as a powerful description of a transforming encounter with Christ.

Easter was wonderful – churches packed, and filled with flowers and resurrection joy. In early May Woodstock hosted the Archdeacon's Visitation, which was in fact an Episcopal Visitation with Bishop Colin encouraging us in mission. The new Archdeaconry of Dorchester was then inaugurated, with Judy French as our first Archdeacon; a great joy for me as we are old friends, a joy increased by Judy becoming a frequent worshipper at St Mary Magdalene's. The wardens and others appreciate her ministry greatly. My diary at this time records great pastoral busyness (as always) with baptisms and funerals, visits and encounters. A really special day was at Bladon, when we interviewed three short-listed candidates for our new stained glass window. We were stunned by the brilliance of Emma Blount's imaginative design, and now find ourselves just a few months away from its installation. May continued with our (now) traditional service and lunch for the 6<sup>th</sup> form leavers from The Marlborough School, and I took over from David Tyler as Area Dean while he enjoyed some well-earned sabbatical leave.

Funerals are always extremely important, no matter how celebrated the person who has died, and we take equal care over all of them. Lady Soames' funeral, held at Bladon last June, was a very special occasion. It was very much a service for the family, and people, were deeply respectful of the family's wishes, as ever in Bladon. Mary was so kind to me in the short time that I knew her, and for many years a huge support in lots of ways to St Martin's. It is wonderful that we now have her Garter banner hanging so magnificently in the church, a great privilege. The D-Day anniversary was commemorated, and I led a service at Woodstock Social Club which was a truly great remembrance. A quarter-peal was rung the following Sunday from St Mary Magdalene's tower (our award-winning bell ringers continue to bring us much pleasure with their skills).

Dennis Harper was much-loved in Woodstock, not least by his comrades from the British Legion: it was an honour to spend much time with him in his last days, and to take his funeral. Many of you helped with the prayer spaces at The Marlborough School, and in the same week, a large number gathered in St Mary Magdalene's to meet our architects and see our plans for the building. Change is rarely without controversy, and yet I have been greatly touched by the grace exhibited by those who disagree with the proposed re-ordering. We are a wonderful family, and like all families, are never going to agree on everything. That our combined witness remains so strong is a sign to the wider community of our loving fellowship. May it never be otherwise.

It was great to be once again a judge at the Winston Churchill Public Speaking Competition at Blenheim alongside Robert Hardy and Lady Henrietta – the talent of the young people who enter is immensely impressive. Inspired, I chaired the Deanery Synod the following evening; then came a super day conference at Jesus College for Woodstock PCC. Lots of meetings took place in July, and lots of visiting and detailed pastoral ministry. The Woodstock Pastoral team (now under the leadership of Pat Woodward) are a marvellous support and shepherds in their own right. Thanks to God for them. The leavers' services for our primary schools took place in our churches, and tears and smiles were in abundance. With the Game Fair swirling around us a Mayor's Sunday service was held at Woodstock. Then we bade farewell to Julie Fenn after many years' service, latterly as Head, at The Marlborough School. She was a superb leader of our church secondary school, and a great support to me as I sought to strengthen links between church and school. It's great to still be in touch with her as she enjoys retirement.

In August much joy came in the form of our placement student from Wycliffe Hall, Mike Print. We really enjoyed having him and Natalie around, and he survived attempts to kidnap him and make him curate by force. We hold him in our prayers as ordination approaches later this year. More joy came at the end of August as Megan and I celebrated our tenth wedding anniversary with you all. Bishop John was with us for the first (and last) time, and Archdeacon Judy for the first (and most definitely not the last) time. Old friends shared with new friends in music and worship, and it was a great party. Thank you again, not only for your love and kindness, which is overwhelming, but also for your generosity in giving money for our chosen charities, SeeSaw and the Foundation for Reconciliation and Relief in the Middle East. Here I should say what a privilege it is to be a trustee of SeeSaw – the work of this small yet effective charity among bereaved children and young people is vital, do support it: [www.seesaw.org.uk](http://www.seesaw.org.uk)

There was a sadness too – our dear friend David Muston died after an extraordinarily serene and dignified period when the cancer returned after many years of remission. My weekly visits to take David and Ros Holy Communion were a highlight, as we chatted, read the Bible, and prayed together. A quiet and simple service was held for David, and we gave thanks for a lovely man of God.

In September we bade farewell to John Pritchard as our diocesan Bishop. The Area system means that we see much more of the Bishop of Dorchester than our Diocesan, but many went to The Grand Day Out and some to John's final Eucharist in the Cathedral when he preached with his characteristic grace, warmth and challenge. Megan and I will miss our old friend and pastor. Dorchester Abbey hosted a service to admit people to the Fellowship of St Birinus, and Rosalind Gerring was admitted to this fellowship in recognition of her steadfast and loyal service to the church in Woodstock, and the Deanery, over many years.

The Woodstock Literary Festival was splendid, and we welcomed some hugely distinguished visitors. Lord Carey preached to us, Steve Hogarth sang to us, Ben Okri read to us, Jessye Norman beamed at us – it really was a wonderful few days, and it's great that the church is so involved.

The October diary started with Harvest celebrations, well attended and well decorated. Remember making the pizza at Woodstock? My life was full of meetings, visits, schools work, house blessings, (I do an increasing number of those), lots of encounters with new people – and then the shock of the sudden death of the 11<sup>th</sup> Duke.

For ten days my life was put on hold, and the lives of many in Woodstock, as we planned and executed what amounted to a small state occasion. I want to pay a heartfelt tribute to the home team at St Mary Magdalene's who never flinched, were constantly cheerful, and, frankly, produced a professional operation of which any Cathedral would be proud. Working with our friends at the Palace, and Nicholas Tonks, was really friendly and fulfilling. We felt the passing of an era, and the loss of a great man. But our primary concern, as always, was the care of those who were bereaved, and I was touched to be drawn into the heart of a family of whom I am very fond.

In November we had a beautiful All Souls service at which Nicholas preached so memorably. Many came in response to our invitations. Then came Remembrance Sunday, crisp and clear, at which the 12<sup>th</sup> Duke read for the first time, and led the town in solemn recollection. The Poet Laureate, Dame Carol Ann Duffy, gave a poetry reading in a full church – it was a great pleasure to meet and introduce her. The next day the church was full again, this time for David Muston's thanksgiving service – how good, a few months after his death, to join with Ros and the boys in giving thanks for him. The following week I was at Westminster Abbey to take part in Lady Soames' Memorial Service, and Roger Humphreys, and a number from Bladon, were able to participate too. Woodstock hosted a Christmas Market attended by (wait for it) around 2000 people – the lights were switched on in town, and then, on Advent Sunday evening, the candlelight twinkled in Bladon as we sang the solemn antiphons and began our month of watching and waiting.

December is always busy – but this one took the biscuit. Nearly 2000 attended a special service at some period during Advent and Christmas in Woodstock alone. In Bladon we put on two extra services to cope with demand. Everyone works so hard to make these acts of worship come to life, not least our wardens, choirs and organists. A great team effort. One really fun 'extra' was the 'Come and Sing Messiah' at Bladon – that was a really happy occasion, and one we intend to repeat. Another marvellous 'extra' was the event we held jointly with the Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum to recall the famous Christmas 'truce' of 1914. People still talk to me about how momentous and moving that was.

It was in December that we were able to announce the appointment of Alice Venning as my new Curate. I am really thrilled about this, and we look forward with keen anticipation to Alice's ordination in July.

This year has, thus far, been dominated by Sir Winston Churchill. I have found myself attending and leading lots of services and events; there have been interviews and broadcasts, and, consequently, a great deal of focus on St Martin's – and rightly so. We strive to get the balance just right between an appropriate guardianship of Sir Winston's grave without it becoming a shrine, and the Churchill family appreciate that very much.

We have welcomed them on many occasions already this year, and look forward to doing so again when the gorgeous stained glass window is installed and officially unveiled later this year – watch this space for exciting further details. Lady Soames generously bequeathed her Banner as a Lady of the Garter from St George's Chapel, Windsor, to St Martin's and it looks magnificent – make sure you go and see it if you haven't already. Speaking of buildings, St Mary Magdalene's is close to having the very final design for the interior as I write – that is really pleasing, and fundraising and planning is about to be at full steam ahead. Make sure that you are part of it.

On top of all these things, the stuff of parish and church life goes on. The activities and opportunities, for the size of our communities, is remarkable - the Breakfasts, the Upper Room, Thomas Group, Pilgrim Group, Thursday Group, Contemplative Prayer, Lunch clubs, Toddlers, Messy Church, choirs, bells, flowers, Woodstock's churchyard team (led by Jenny), the Pastoral Team, school Governors – to name but a few! The undergirding of all our ministry by fantastic and incredibly hard-working churchwardens, PCC officers and members, and the whole people, of God engaged in all kinds of ministries for our Sunday worship, and day by day, is humbling, thrilling, and a great gift. My clergy colleagues are SO good, and Clare, Shaun, Nathan (who returns, with the boys, to work at the end of the Spring), Stephen, Barbara, Wendy – not to mention my wife, Megan, who in addition to her already busy life has added some Sunday ministry here – they are a blessing to me and to us all. I truly thank God for all of them, and for all of you.

There is a great deal of change ahead. We are not at all looking forward to bidding farewell to Clare and the family, who have made such an impact on our lives. We are wobbled by the uncertainty of the proposed developments in Woodstock East, and need to prepare for ministry to our whole parish, whatever the outcome. We are needing to get our heads round the fact that, in 2016, St Mary Magdalene's will be closed for a long period of time, and we will be a pilgrim people in an entirely new way – that will be a huge upheaval for us all.

Wisdom and experience tell us that, for Christians, the best is always yet to come. That's what heaven means, and the godly open their eyes to glimpse it in this life, rather than wait for it in the next. So there is nothing to fear, and everything to live for. We can never predict what will come. But we can be certain of the love and grace of God to sustain us, and to strengthen us.

I am finishing this review on the feast of George Herbert, that great priest and poet of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In his poem 'The Collar', he raves, almost panics, because of the weight of his sin, and the fear and uncertainty he bears. But the poem ends with these simple, heart-easing lines

*But as I rav'd, and grew more fierce and wild  
At every word,  
Me thoughts I heard one calling, "Child";  
And I replied, "My Lord."*

Our future is in His hands. What blessed assurance. Let us trust in his love as we go on together, working for His Kingdom, seeking His Glory.

**The Reverend Canon Adrian Daffern**