

## **Annual Report to High Halden Parish Council**

**APCM May 2025**

My apologies that I am unable to attend the annual meeting as this is Holy Week – a busy and important time for us in church.

This is the first Annual Report since we united the parishes of Bethersden, High Halden and Woodchurch to form the new parish of Denswood. This gives us an opportunity to pool our gifts and resources and reduce some of the time spent in meetings. The PCC of Denswood is now registered with the Charity Commission, and our PCC members are also charity trustees.

My personal thanks to those who work so hard to keep us running, especially those who help us so many different ways. We are blessed to have a ministry team with lay and ordained colleagues who provide services in our three parish churches of St Margaret's Bethersden, St Mary's High Halden, and All Saints Woodchurch. It has been wonderful to welcome our curate, Revd Maria Stuttford, to join us – Maria lives in High Halden, and I am sure that many local people will have met Maria. I remain committed to offering lay and ordained led worship services with a mix of formal and informal styles and music to welcome those who enjoy traditional and more formal services, and also those who may be less familiar with church and enjoy more contemporary music and worship.

I am also grateful to those who help us in all sorts of ways – preparing rotas, as sides persons, sacristans and eucharistic ministers, welcoming those who visit and attend our churches, by serving refreshments after services, catering at social events, running our foodbanks, fundraising, and as flower arrangers, cleaners, and to those who look after our

churchyards. We are blessing that so many people are so generous with their time.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to our Church Warden in High Halden – Sally Baldock. Sally has now served her three year term and will be standing down at our annual meeting next month. She has worked tirelessly in supporting the church and has led our projects to install a new heating system and a toilet, which will be finally connected to the main sewer by the time you read this – we are pleased to be able to offer this community facility, and feel that we will be able to open our doors to more events and groups now that we have better heating and a toilet.

### **Mission and Ministry**

2024 was another busy year in our churches for funerals, memorials and burials of ashes – Maria, Tracey, Mike and I conducted a total of 48 services (there were 49 in 2023).

We were delighted to conduct 8 weddings in our churches (the same number as in 2023); this year we have 6 bookings, with the first is in May – we have two weddings and a wedding blessing in St Mary's.

Last year we conducted 19 baptisms of children and 5 for adults, which is a record number since I arrived in the parish in 2020. (In 2023 we had just 10 child baptisms and 1 adult). We are excited to see God at work in this, and we are currently look at how we engage with baptism families to encourage them in their journeys of faith.

On Sundays we continue to offer alternate Morning Worship and Eucharist services, in our three churches with a Group Service on 5<sup>th</sup> Sundays, which is now an informal all age service. The fourth Sunday in High Halden is an informal café church service held in school. We also

have occasional celebratory Benefice Services. Holy week and Easter services have been moving around the Benefice each year, and it is good to see some people travelling around for services, and also perhaps experiencing services of a different tradition, as we look to provide a range of ways to connect with the Passion of Christ in Holy Week.

Our Average Sunday Attendance during 2024, was as follows, with 2023 figures in brackets:

Bethersden 26 (26) adults and 1(0) child  
High Halden 20 (18) adults and 1(1) child  
Woodchurch 18 (19) adults and 2(1) child

Parish total 64(63) adults and 4(2) children. It is good to see an increase, where new people have balanced the loss of those who have died and/or moved away. The increase in children is as a direct result of the baptisms during our services, particularly in High Halden and Woodchurch.

The church likes to compare attendance with pre Covid levels – for information the Average Sunday Attendance in our parishes in 2019 was as follows:

Bethersden – 28 adults and 2 children  
High Halden – 20 adults and 1 child  
Woodchurch – 24 adults and 1 child

This totals 72 adults and 4 children, so High Halden is now at pre-Covid levels, but Bethersden and Woodchurch still have lower attendance than 5 years ago – sadly, the majority of our funerals are for those who have lived in these two villages.

We also record the total number of people who attend services throughout the year in our churches:

Bethersden 511 (887) adults 208 (236) children  
High Halden 874(538) adults 2142(1195) children  
Woodchurch 1083(1045) adults and 3031(3375) children

This is a wonderful indicator of all of the church attendances throughout the year, and good for everyone to see just how many children come into our churches during a typical year.

I am pleased that we are part of the Inclusive Churches network, and it was a privilege to be able to use the Living in Love and Faith Prayers to give a blessing to a same sex couple in Woodchurch last year. We are keen to look at other aspects of inclusivity, and will be welcoming a disability advisor to look at our churches soon, with a view to recommending how we can improve.

## **Fabric**

We continue to spend considerable time and money on the care of our three historic and beautiful church buildings. We are grateful to those who support our fundraising efforts. During 2024 we undertook the following work in each church:

All Saints Woodchurch – urgent repairs to the East Wall, funded with thanks by a grant from the National Lottery (we also have planned boundary wall work from this grant to be undertaken this year); a new sound system funded by an anonymous donor; roof repairs, part funded by an insurance claim following bad weather.

St Mary's High Halden – adjustments to the heating system recently installed to improved performance (cost met by supplier); installation of new toilet in church (this job to be completed in April 2025), part funded by the Gurd Trust (a church fabric restricted fund), with thanks also to Ashford Borough Council, and the Benefact Trust and Kent Historic Churches (most of the financial spend and grant income for this project will appear in 2025 accounts).

St Margaret's Bethersden – repairs to stained glass windows funded by an insurance claim, and an electricity condition report completed. We also had asbestos surveys completed in High Halden and Woodchurch.

I continue to feel blessed to lead the Parish of Denswood, with the many gifts and blessings we have. With our heating and toilet facilities in High Halden we are now well placed to develop our mission of welcome and hospitality in St Mary's. Our churches all had Mission Action Plans prepared and reviewed around 2-3 years ago and, so in 2025 we will look at seeing how God might be leading us as we put together a Denswood Mission Action Plan. I hope and pray that we can all serve together to continue to grow God's kingdom in this corner of the Diocese of Canterbury.

*Reverend Sue Rose*