

ST MARTIN OF TOURS CHURCH, ASHURST



INTRODUCTION

The village of Ashurst (incorporating the hamlet of Stone Cross) is situated just over 4 miles west of Royal Tunbridge Wells, on the upper reaches of the River Medway adjacent to the East Sussex border. The village is dissected by the main A264 which runs from Tunbridge Wells to East Grinstead and beyond. It has a population of around 180. The surrounding area is predominantly rural, incorporating a number of farms, and some small business enterprises. There is no longer a school, shop, post office or public house in the village, and a bus service is largely non-existent.

There is a mainline station at Ashurst which runs direct into London Bridge, so is very convenient for commuters to the City, whilst others travel into Tunbridge Wells and the surrounding area for work. There is a wide variety of inhabitants of the village - from retirees, to younger families, to singles and couples who all value the quiet lifestyle and beautiful rural surroundings within a comparatively short distance to shopping, cultural and leisure facilities.

The community also has a vibrant and modern village hall and separate sportsground with excellent facilities that are used for a number of village events and activities, and support a number of hirers from further afield.

There has been a place of worship in Ashurst since 927 AD, when a Monk-house was built. The building was rebuilt and enlarged in 1230. Further re-modelling took place quite some years later in 1862 when a Vestry was built, and again in 1906. The Lychgate was erected as a War Memorial in 1920, and electric light was installed in the church in 1948.



The current number of parishioners on the Electoral Roll is 28. The Church seating capacity is around 60. We generally hold two regular services each month, augmented by occasional additional services – sometimes self-run – for special festivals and events. We are a caring community, which became particularly noticeable during the Covid pandemic. There is always lots of socialising following our services, occasionally involving a glass of wine and some nibbles. We make a particular point of serving mulled wine and mince pies following our Carols by Candlelight service, which is always popular and well-attended. We hold regular “Bring and Share” lunches in the village hall after special services which helps us to rekindle our friendships.



Ashurst Village Hall

THE CHALLENGES AT ST MARTINS

St Martins has always had the challenge of serving a small community. While the population of Ashurst and Stone Cross is around 180, there are only 28 parishioners on the Electoral Roll. However, the church is appreciated by church goers and non-goers alike and the village community is tight, active and supportive which could and should provide a springboard for renewed growth in the church.

Until a few years ago, St Martins held weekly services but now only 2 services are held each month which has resulted in a certain loss of momentum. The average attendance at each of the 2 monthly services ranges from 10 to 20. However, for more high-profile services such as Harvest Festival, Remembrance Day and the Carol Service the attendances increase. In recent years the attendances at the Carol Services have ranged from 40 to 80 suggesting that there is scope to attract many more local people to other services. The standard services currently provided each month are Communion and Evensong. These cater for the more traditional, older members of the church but are not attracting new attendees or families. The small village has a surprisingly large number of families and one of the challenges for the new Rector will be to make the church relevant to them and to attract the younger generation into church. This was achieved in the early noughties when a family service took place every month and an attendance of 40 or 50 was not uncommon. A number of new houses are currently being built between Ashurst and Stone Cross and it is expected that more families will be joining the local community.

The challenge is therefore to provide services and spiritual succour for the more traditional members of the church while at the same time attracting new members of the community, particularly families, to worship at St Martins.



BIBLE STUDY HOME GROUP

St Martins has an active home group that meets fortnightly through the winter months. The group was started 22 years ago by the then Rector and has continued uninterrupted ever since. Nowadays attendance ranges from 8 to 14 with an average in 2024 of 12. The group meet in the home of one of the participants and spend the first hour enjoying a meal with wine. The second half of the evening is led by one of the group (recently by one of the parish's Readers who lives nearby) and usually involves the study of a particular passage or theme from the bible. The group has occasionally followed a prepared course - a course by Pete Greig was the most recent course followed. The home group is imbued with a sense of amazing, spiritual fellowship, is greatly valued by those attending and goes from strength to strength.



FIELD SERVICES

Lockdown during the covid epidemic provided a major challenge to churches up and down the country, St Martins being no exception. However, local church members took this challenge head on and put on outdoor services in the summer in the glebe field near the church. These were fairly informal affairs and were led by members of the church. People were encouraged to bring picnics, drinks and chairs – and children! Latterly hot dogs and ice lollies were provided. As a result a good number of families attended and the numbers coming ranged from 15 to 45. These services were a terrific success and attracted a significant number of local residents who had not previously attended the traditional services in church.

CHURCH BUILDING AND HISTORY



Christian worship has probably taken place in Ashurst for more than a thousand years. A previous rector refers to the church as having first been built between 921 and 927 A.D. 'by a gift from St. Albans'. However, the oldest identifiable part of the present structure is the Eastern end of the nave, an area the shape of just under a double square, with thick walls that taper upwards on the inside. It is tentatively dated archaeologically to the 12th century.

The building has undergone many changes since that time. The nave was extended westwards and the timber bellcote above built in the first half of the 14th century. Where the extension starts the inside of the walls changes from tapered to straight with a smoothed transition. Either at the time of this additional work or somewhat later a gallery was built just east of the tower. It was lighted by two dormer windows, one each in the North and South slopes of the roof. The chancel was rebuilt in the same period as the West extension. The 'decorated' style of the East window is consistent with this, and the identical nature of the ornamental stonework in the chancel and the West doorway suggests a unified campaign. Details of that rebuilding are not known.



The next major building event was the addition to the nave of a South porch in 1621, financed by Sir George Rivers of Chafford, an estate just North-East of the church with its farmstead in the neighbouring parish of Penshurst, who had recently acquired the manor of Ashurst. The Rivers' coat of arms and the date can be seen below the sundial above the entry to the South porch.

Benjamin Ferrey designed the first major restoration and changes to the building in modern times. The work was carried out in 1861-62. Probably in advance of the main project the gallery at the West end was demolished and the dormer windows removed; their former position is still recognisable from the somewhat different rafters used to close the gaps in the roof.

The most drastic measure inside the church was the lowering of the nave floor by about two feet. This necessitated adjusting the access from the South porch, which was done by taking down the whole porch, fitting a new doorway into the nave, constructing a new floor and four steps leading to the outside and rebuilding the porch 'using the old facing and some new stone' on the outside and new ashlar on the inside. Another major part of this project was the introduction of the stone arch under the East side of the tower. On the North side of the nave a vestry was added (now the storeroom). The nave and chancel walls and the nave ceiling were re-plastered.



In or just before 1904 the Field family of Ashurst Park offered to pay for the building of a new, larger vestry, including an organ chamber, and for refurbishing the chancel. This work was designed by the architect George Fellowes Prynne and carried out in 1904/05. The new vestry, a one-story structure with a low copper roof, is attached to the North side of the chancel. Initially the space for the organ remained unused while funds for its installation were being raised.





In 1907 enough money was available to commission the building of a pipe organ by Hele & Co. of Plymouth. The church celebrated the instrument's one hundredth anniversary with a festival weekend in July 2007.



As already mentioned, the Lychgate was erected as a War Memorial in 1920, and electric light was installed in the church in 1948.

CHURCH FINANCES

The church currently has a respectable sum on its balance sheet but we are not living within our budget. While this can be attributed to some unforeseen Church yard expenses, we cannot take our financial good health for granted and need to think of additional ways of raising money. A very successful fund-raising Progressive Supper is held each spring in the village and this involves many villagers not immediately associated with the Church.



OUR HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

As has been identified, we hope that the new Rector can identify ways in which more local people engage with the church and can spread Mission to the wider community. Of course a vital requirement from our incoming Rector will be the ability to connect with people from all strands of society. We seek someone who likes people, who has empathy and who can comfort those in trouble or despair; someone who can sustain the faith of St Martins' parishioners; and someone who can bring God's love and blessing into the lives of those that have not yet experienced God's presence or whose faith needs renewing.



Sepia drawing of St. Martin's by William F. Saunders, 1853

Thanks to Bryan Ellis for some of the photos from Google