

ST MARY'S CHURCH SALEHURST AND ROBERTSBRIDGE.

Parish Profile 2015



St Mary's Church in the centre of Salehurst, photographed from the north east. Robertsbridge lies to the right of this view

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Robertsbridge High Street, looking north. Station Road is on the left

OUR VISION

WE ASPIRE TO SPREAD THE KNOWLEDGE AND THE LOVE OF GOD THROUGHOUT THE PARISH AND BEYOND.

We are a living Christian community worshipping on a site where a church has stood for nearly a thousand years

We are a Christian family that aims to spread the good news of God's love and salvation, and to offer spiritual comfort and friendship to all who desire it.

We recognise that mission and outreach is one aspect of church life that has been somewhat neglected within the parish in the recent past; however, it is our firm desire that, working with our new priest, we make significant steps forward in this area and to become much more mission-focussed.

We seek to set a Christian example by upholding Christian values and by prayerful concern for others.

We aim to be an inclusive and broad church, welcoming and open to all.

As in many predominantly rural parishes, our worship is traditionally based; however, it is vibrant and aspires to encompass a wide spectrum of views.

We acknowledge that there is always room for improvement and we are alive to the need to keep abreast of spiritual developments in the wider Church of England community.

Within the parish we organise and take part in many local activities, by quiet example aiming to encourage Christian fellowship and inclusivity and to foster wider links throughout the community.

We wish to begin to plan and implement a strategy for church life that has, at its heart, the need to reach out more effectively to our community with the gospel; and, especially to develop our relationship with our local schools, and to increase the opportunities we have there.

We are happy to partake in joint worship with other churches, to foster links with churches of other denominations, and to share our experiences with other parishes. We value our links with Holy Trinity, Hurst Green.

As Christians, we should accept a social and moral responsibility to help communities at home and overseas in trouble or less fortunate than ourselves.

We have a duty of care to manage our affairs responsibly. We must ensure that we remain a thriving Christian community, able to set an exemplary example to succeeding generations and to hand on a well-used and well-maintained parish church.



St Mary's from the north east. During the summer a flock of sheep graze the churchyard.

OUR PARISH

St Mary's Church lies in the centre of the small hamlet of Salehurst which was the original early-medieval settlement sited on the then road from London to Hastings where it crossed this part of the Rother valley in East Sussex. Salehurst was soon eclipsed as the main centre of population by the growth of Robertsbridge, a little over a mile to the southwest on the opposite or south side of the river Rother. This was originally established to serve Robertsbridge Abbey, a Cistercian house founded here c.1176. Robertsbridge was a market town by the fourteenth century, prospering further when the London-Hastings road was shifted westwards and, since 1852, from its location adjacent to the direct London-Hastings railway line. The northern end of the village was originally a separate hamlet of Northbridge Street. As its name implies, this was centred on the original medieval bridge over the river Rother.

Robertsbridge once had at least two coaching inns and the centre is notable for the number of late-medieval and Tudor houses. New housing estates have been built west of the High Street, partly on a former sawmill site, and more houses are planned. There is a small permanent site for Travellers east of the village. The village acquired a much-needed by-pass about 25 years ago along with a new Church of England primary school, currently with 180 pupils, located in the centre of the village close to the vicarage. The latter, built in the 1960s, is well-sited for the priest and the majority of parishioners and enjoys a secluded garden. Adjacent is the Church Hall completed soon after 1900 and the first stage of an ambitious and unrealised plan to build a church in the village centre. Since the completion of a much larger Community Hall near the railway station in the late 1980s, the Church Hall has been under-used.

The parish itself remains predominantly rural and agricultural with a scattered farming community. The present combined population of the two communities is around 2,700. The proportion of the local population aged over 65 is 19.7% compared the 28.4% in Rother District and the national average of 16.4%. The average median household income in

Salehurst and Robertsbridge is £35,528, compared to the average for England and Wales of £28,661 and Rother District of £26,332. House prices are high - the average for a property in Robertsbridge is around £422,000 with asking prices in Salehurst around £469,000. These figures probably reflect the growth of commuting to London jobs since the electrification of the railway in the 1980s. One consequence has been to price many locals out of the property market. Commuting has grown at roughly the same time as local employment opportunities have declined - in the last thirty years, a major sawmill and a big flourmill have closed, mining opportunities at the gypsum mine have contracted and the three village garages have been replaced by housing. Although agriculture remains important, employment opportunities in this industry too have been declining. The village is well known in cricketing circles for its famous cricket bat factory.

Robertsbridge still has a spread of shops – including a hairdresser, florists, small supermarket, chemist, newsagent and post-office, farm shop, bakery and café, three lively pubs, Indian restaurant and second-hand bookshop. There is also a lawn mower and garden equipment shop and a large agricultural merchant with a garage. There is a doctor's surgery and a veterinary practice as well as a retirement/nursing home. An hourly bus service links Maidstone, Cranbrook, Battle and Hastings and a good rail service runs to London and Hastings. The Church of England primary school with a roll of 180 lies in the centre of the village. West of the station is the Community College with 650 students, 13% of whom come from the parish and the rest from neighbouring settlements.

The community is a lively one with some fifty clubs, societies and associations listed in the Villager. Their memberships include many of our congregation whose participation in these groups demonstrates Christian outreach in a practical, though largely inconspicuous way. Members of the church, as individuals, play significant roles such as chairman, secretary, treasurer or leader of groups as diverse as Age Concern, scouts and guides, Royal British Legion, Primary School and Red Cross. A number of individuals prefer to demonstrate their Christian faith through quietly helping others rather than more overtly marching under the banner of “the Church” – a label which can be seen by some in the community as off-putting.

OUR CHURCH BUILDINGS.



For more than 800 years the tower of St Mary's church in the centre of Salehurst has been a beacon of Christianity and a conspicuous feature of this part of the Rother valley. Domesday Book records a church on this site by 1086. The earliest surviving fabric in the present building is the lower part of the west tower with its round-headed doorway of no later than about 1200 (*left*). However, the church mostly dates from a reconstruction by Simon de Etchingham, probably begun soon after 1226 when he recovered the Advowson. There were further minor reconstructions and modifications in the fourteenth century, including the timber-framed south porch and present aisle windows. In the tracery of three of the latter in the south aisle survive fragments of bird drawings in brown on green glass similar in their draughtsmanship to those in the late 14th century Pepysian volume at Magdalene College, Cambridge. The rebuilding created what is reputedly one of the largest rural parish churches in Sussex. In the mid-nineteenth

century, following a period of neglect of the fabric, the clerestory was reconstructed with new lancet windows and the nave and chancel re-roofed under the direction of the architect David Brandon. An extensive churchyard, now closed for further burials, surrounds the church and outside this is clustered the hamlet of Salehurst with its pub, farm shop and council-run cemetery.



In 2005 the church had an extensive conservation programme costing around £185,000. Fund-raising involved the entire community and with a variety of initiatives, hard work and considerable enjoyment the parish raised around £100,000. The balance came from a number of grant-giving bodies including the Sussex Historic Churches Trust and English Heritage. The work included renewing the aisle roofs, which were badly affected by rot and beetle, repointing the clerestory walls, repairs to part of the west tower and the medieval west porch. New gutters, downpipes and a more efficient drainage system were installed. The medieval south porch was re-shingled (*left*). The peal of eight bells was rehung on new bearings and the cracked tenor bell of 1771 was recast. The brick path to the west porch was relaid and a second path was regraded to make the church accessible for wheel-chair users. In the church interior there were minor repairs to the floors and the

electrical system. A sound system and hearing loop together with more efficient lighting were installed. In the churchyard a number of unsafe tomb chests were carefully conserved.

As with all ancient buildings, maintenance has to be skilled and on-going. Yet to be tackled are conservation works on the upper part of the west tower and the east wall of the chancel.

At the start of the twentieth century, a church hall was constructed in the centre of Robertsbridge. This is used for many of the church events. Until the present vacancy in the living, a regular 9.00am communion service was also held in it each Sunday catering especially for the elderly and those without transport. General use by the village has diminished sharply since construction of a much larger community hall around twenty years ago. The fabric of the building needs maintenance and its facilities need to be modernised.

Nearby the church hall is a spacious vicarage constructed in the 1960s. Both are well-sited and convenient for the majority of residents who live in Robertsbridge.

OUR CHURCH CONGREGATION



Although the church is some distance from the great majority of its parishioners, it has a loyal and growing congregation. Sunday attendances broadly reflect the population profile of the parish and average around 70 with a number of young, especially at the Family Eucharist on the first Sunday of each month. We value our links with the congregation of Holy Trinity, Hurst Green.

Sunday services at St Marys are at 11.00. The first Sunday each month is a Family Eucharist; the second and fourth Sundays are Sung Eucharists and the third and fifth Sundays are Matins. On the second Thursday there is a Holy Communion at 8pm. The Eucharist services follow the Common Worship, Holy Communion Order One in Traditional Language. In the summer there is an occasional evensong.

(Left: looking east to the chancel)

- For the main festivals of Christmas and Easter and for Remembrance Sunday the church nave is usually full (the church can seat around 300).
- The choir is thriving, currently with around 18 members including a junior choir. There is a full team of bell-ringers and the church bells are regularly rung.
- The church has links with local schools which come here for Christmas and end of term services.
- The church is a popular location for weddings.
- The church is well-used by the community for occasional concerts and musical events.
- A rota of flower-arrangers and volunteers look after the interior of the church, while regular churchyard working parties assist the small flock of sheep in maintaining the surrounding churchyard.

OUR CHURCH AND THE COMMUNITY

The Church enjoys a good reputation within the village; as well as the main church festivals, Rogation Sunday, Harvest Festival and Remembrance Sunday attract a wide following in this rural community; Parents and Godparents of children being baptised, and couples preparing for their wedding are all encouraged to join the congregation and to play an active part in the life of the Church.

We have:

- A well-established and lively monthly parish magazine, *The Villager*. This is produced by the church, is available in local shops and has wide circulation in the community.
- A number of joint events with the wider community, including village walks, occasional summer concerts in the church and joint fund raising events with local organisations such as the Royal British Legion and Robertsbridge Arts Partnership.
- An annual Christmas Market in the church hall in Robertsbridge. This is our central public fund-raising event, supplemented by a growing number of other initiatives, including a Spring market.

We propose

- To improve information about church services and village events through more co-ordinated and up to date information and publicity in the local papers, the *Villager*, the church website, and on parish notice boards

We remain eager to build on all these links and to become even more enmeshed in the local community, accessible and welcoming to all.

OUR SPIRITUAL LIFE

We are keen to encourage and nurture spiritual growth in our community and have sought the views of our congregation on how we might achieve this in the absence of our permanent vicar. There is clearly a plea for more family-friendly services, a greater warmth in welcoming newcomers, and a wish for the church to have a more visible presence at community events.

We already have

- A monthly Prayer Group with representatives from St Mary's, the Community Church (URC), Hawkhurst Baptists, Holy Trinity Hurst Green and the Darvel Community. This focusses on the spiritual life here, praying for the growth of the latter.
- A Bible Study Group which grew out of Alpha and Christianity Explored courses. This meets weekly in different houses and is seeking to increase its membership.
- A church reading/discussion group to look at selected books and texts, following requests from members of the congregation.

We are

- restarting, initially on a quarterly basis, the popular 'St Mary's Breakfasts at the Salehurst Halt'. Open to all, these are designed to encourage fellowship and promote a Christian message delivered by invited speakers.
- seeing an increased level of support for the Diocesan Family Support Work, mainly through donations of groceries, household goods and presents for children at Christmas and Easter; also by participation in FSW fund-raising events

OUR FINANCIAL VIABILITY

It would be idle to pretend that the recent and unexpected departure of our vicar was anything other than a shock to the congregation. However, we are looking to the future and are seeking to build on what has been achieved.

- The electoral roll has started to rise again and we are actively addressing the income gap.
- Those on the electoral roll are being encouraged to increase their regular donations to around £8-£10 a week.
- We are adopting the Parish Giving Scheme.
- We have set up a 100 Club with a view to increasing fund-giving from the wider community.
- We are actively considering establishing a Friends Group to raise monies for the ongoing conservation of the church fabric and the churchyard.
- We aim to make our church financial position acceptable to the diocese as rapidly as possible.

OUR NEW VICAR

There has never been a greater need here for a full-time stipendiary priest devoted to the guidance, nurturing and growth of the community's spiritual life. The parish of Salehurst and Robertsbridge is a sizable, lively and growing community, with its schools and recent housing estates and the planned construction of a further 155 houses in the near future.

To provide the leadership and guidance we are looking for a priest who will have:

- A proven track record in developing spiritual growth in a rural parish.
- Good pastoral, communication and listening skills, with a heart for, and practical experience of, mission and outreach, with the ability to inspire and encourage others. A sense of humour.
- An ability to rekindle and sustain pastoral care on a regular and consistent basis.
- A conviction that the church must meet the needs of young families, children and young people.
- An understanding of the many aspects of a rural parish and a willingness and capability to engage with the local community.
- A will to place the church at the heart of the community.

