



## **PARISH CHURCH OF ST JAMES, RIDING MILL**

When we locked our doors at the beginning of the pandemic, in common with every other church, we were looking at an uncertain path ahead. When would we meet again to worship? When could we meet face to face? How could we best support those in the community who were most vulnerable? There was much discussion behind the scenes and a lot of support offered by the Diocese of Newcastle and by the National Church of England.

The period between the first lockdown and summer was, as we all know, difficult. However, by August, by when there was a loosening of restrictions – perhaps unwisely as it turned out – we were able to offer live worship in the fresh air of our new graveyard. The pure joy and relief of being back together face to face was palpable. By early November, our indoor services were halted again, though now we embraced the technology offered by Zoom and continued to offer online worship until early December, when we again returned to the church building for the Christmas period. From January we continued with Zoom services as the building again closed, reopening again on Easter Sunday. We hope that this is now the pattern for the future, with our Wednesday services continuing on line, certainly in the medium term.

The continuity of worship has only been possible because of the tireless efforts of our Lay Minister, Gwyn McKenzie, who has planned and led the majority of services in this period, but we are also most grateful to the visiting priests who have, whenever possible, presided at our Eucharist services. We have been delighted to welcome our friends from Riding Mill Methodist Church who have joined us – and continue to join us - for services on both Sundays and Wednesdays whilst their building has remained closed – for the time being. It is particularly lovely to welcome Revd Marie Beard, our Methodist minister, to lead our worship whenever her diary allows.

It is very pleasing to note that our attendance figures have been very much the same as before the pandemic struck and are now set to rise as ‘new normality’ approaches in June.

It will be two years on June 9th since Revd Lesley Chapman presided over her last service in Riding Mill. This intervening period has been very productive for our church as the work of our Vision Group, launched by Revd Chapman in 2018, has developed and progressed. The PCC has continued this work and is now in a position to report the findings and first recommendations to the Annual Parochial Church Meeting on May 30th.

The Group was tasked with revisiting the relationship between St James’s Church and the community it serves both now and in years to come. Many people have been consulted during this process, both within the congregation and within the community in general. The findings make really

interesting reading and will inevitably help shape what we do and how we do it in future. We are most grateful to all those who have contributed to the Vision in any way.

Part of the responsibility of a Christian community is to help care for God's creation. St James's Church takes this commitment increasingly seriously. We are now in the process of working towards being an Ecochurch, for which registration as such will mean meeting stringent requirements. These can be visited on our website. Our Green Group has some really interesting ideas. If you would like to join, please just ask!

As part of our commitment to the environment, we are in the process of redeveloping our new graveyard, which I am sure has not evaded anyone's attention! We have removed the bank of conifers bordering the west perimeter of the graveyard after taking professional advice. These trees were potentially dangerous in the wrong weather conditions and posed a hazard to the school building and of course to the children too. We have removed decades of unusable grave spoil (actually a mere 65 tons of it!) along the eastern perimeter. This area is now being converted into a Quiet Space which will link directly into the Spinney and be available for use by anyone in the village seeking somewhere to reflect, to pray or just to be. In the autumn we will be planting ecofriendly native small trees and shrubs around the perimeter, along with wild-life friendly planting in the planters. Because of the inherent dangers posed by graveyards, children will only be allowed to use the Space if accompanied by an adult. The village has no need for a second play park!

The new Quiet Space will also be used for outdoor worship, including as part of the licencing of our new priest, Revd Diana Johnson, who will be joining us officially from mid-July. Revd Johnson will find a very warm welcome in Riding Mill as she relocates from Cambridgeshire. We know that Revd Diana will be a blessing not simply to the St James's Church congregation, but to the whole community of Riding Mill.

There are exciting times ahead for our village church, which offers a new vision for all and a new priest to guide and walk with us in what is to come. Anyone is welcome to join the journey.....

David McKenzie  
**Church Warden**