Rector’s Annual  Report for APCM St Mary’s in the Marketplace
13 April 2014

The past year has been a momentous one in the life of this Parish church. This year seen the culmination of many years of thought and planning and preparation for the historic reordering of the interior which is now almost complete.

At first it was suggested at the PCC , some years ago, that it would be helpful to remove the pews from the side aisles, since they were of little use, and were very untidy and in the way. Despite their weight and size, we managed to put on a full Christmas programme each year, and an amazing flower festival too. As time went by it was concluded that all the pews in the nave would one day have to go. That was the will of the PCC and it remained on paper until things began to happen in a more definite way, and decisions were having to be taken about the future of the church .

The arrival of Canon John Briggs, who had been a very good friend of my predecessor the late Canon Alan Fairhurst, and who had longed to see the Parish church come to life, heralded that much needed impetus together with years of experience in these things in Macclesfield, to get the ball rolling. Without the dedicated input and guidance ,and hands on enthusiasm ,combined with an eagle eye for detail, and a determination to see the job through, shown by John Briggs ,we would not be here today. We owe him a great debt of gratitude. I am immensely grateful for his continuing support, since he is determined to see the work brought to a successful conclusion.

What has been achieved has surprised everybody and impressed most people. The objectors , who sadly cost us thousands  of £ pounds in legal fees faded into the mists, and in their place positive people who really wanted to make a go of St. Mary's in the 21 st Century put their hands to the plough so to speak, and we set off. Sue Heap  and Isobel Clarkson have worked steadfastly behind the scenes, giving long hours and careful thought to the finances especially, and for that we are very grateful. Without them, we would not be in the position we are today.

For many years I have described St. Mary's as the Welcoming Church. It is certainly a friendly church, and people who have visited us  often tell me about the nice ladies or old gentlemen they have met, and how
interesting they found it. Sadly on one occasion an off duty clergyman came to visit and managed to walk in and out without anyone speaking to him, and he recorded this unwelcome fact of life on a response form he filled in. Volunteers are a much valued but rare commodity, and St. Mary's is sadly lacking in this particular regard. If the church is to continue to call itself
 The Welcoming Church, then it needs to make the welcome of visitors a higher priority than it is at present, and more members need to volunteer their time to the church.

Last month, in my absence sadly, St. Mary's hosted a ground breaking concert with the presence in full of the Stockport Youth Orchestra, who came at my request, and on a free of charge basis. They filled the church and the evening was by all accounts a great success. During the year we have also hosted two major exhibitions , MASHAV and the unique Art installation titled TOWN whose origins were the top of the tower of St. Mary's from where Neil Dimelow, the artist had sketched his panoramic view of Stockport, in a way never seen before. I hope that a copy of the original paintings will one day become part of the must- see at St .Mary's installed in the church.

Together with the ever expanding and changing Christmas Programme of Carol Services and Concerts in December, St. Mary's  is demonstrating to all who care to observe, that a town centre parish church, devoid of a large parish  around it, not only has a good reason to exist, but every reason to thrive and to engage with the community in which it is set. We rejoice at every opportunity to make the community feel that this ancient church is an important and vital part of its shared and diverse life in the 21st Century. The use of the tower as a service point for the soup kitchen, run by Chelwood Baptist Church on Sunday evenings has been further proof of this proactive engagement with the community, and one much appreciated by the wider Christian community as well as by the patrons of the Soup kitchen. Sadly that arrangement has come to an end . It was only meant to be for the winter months, but wear and tear to the tower floor has prompted us to withdraw this popular venue for the time being at least.

The Mayor of Stockport is a regular visitor to St. Mary's , I am glad to say, and the tradition of the Civic Service , held after the Mayor Making in May, is still on the Town Hall calendar, and on the church's too.  Times have changed since I came to be Rector in 1996,  and this is nowhere more obvious than in our relationship with the Town Hall.

Changes in personnel and the way of doing things has altered beyond recognition, but I'm glad to say that the Borough Council are still willing to give dignity to the office of Mayor to a Borough Councillor each year, and I trust that St. Mary's will always be known and remain actively engaged as the Civic Church. It was suggested to me last week that the service had moved into
 St. George's.  I hope that this is not indicative of a movement behind the scenes to undermine our historic role in Stockport's civic life.

It has been an honour for me to be Chaplain to the Mayor again, this past year, and I look forward to sharing that honour with Rev Margaret Tait,  a retired  URC minister to the incoming Mayor, Councillor Kevin Hogg in the year ahead.

The Borough Council are responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of the Churchyard, as is well known and obvious to parishioners one hopes. We're it not so, it would be a tremendous burden on the congregation, and would not look as manicured and cared for as it is. We are most grateful to SMBC not only for the fulfilment of their statutory duties towards us, but also for the interest and concern which they continue to show us. I would particularly like to pay tribute to Paul Curran ,who until his retirement last month was the Council officer in charge  of cemeteries. He did a great deal to help us with the upkeep and development of the churchyard and I know he enjoyed doing so.

After a number of years serving as the organist for Sunday services at St. Mary's Isobel Clarkson retired from that voluntary duty, at my suggestion. Her commitment to the worshipping life of the church was second to noone, and for that we were grateful . Her choice of hymns was always spot on and it was a pleasure always,to hear her play. It goes without saying that she is greatly missed. She once said , I will never see you without an organist, but now she is, sadly, seeing the church without an organist, which is something not many of you have experienced before.  It is not the first time we have been without an organist at St. Mary's and I'm sure it won't be the last. The interesting thing is that the singing gets better Sunday by Sunday and worship continues, despite the lack of an organist.

I am used to leading worship in Wengen with CD accompaniment, when no organist is available, but I am not yet inclined to go to those lengths just yet. This church deserves an organist.  Keep praying for the right person to volunteer their services. I am very grateful to Ken, who kindly continues to offer his services playing the organ on Tuesdays.

I am delighted to have been joined by Rita Waters as Reader in the parish during the past year. She comes to us with many years of experience in a neighbouring parish of St. Matthew's and it is so good to have a colleague with whom one can not only share services , but also whom I can ,with confidence , leave in charge of the services when I am away.

I recently had reason to look at all my photos of the parish, taken over the last 17 years, and I was saddened to see how many of the congregation had died since arrived.

One can look at this in one of two ways.

It is naturally sad to lose someone dear, and they were all dear to us.
On the other hand one could say how good it was to have known them and to have spent happy hours with them, in church, or in the case of my photo Record  , in the Rectory  and Rectory Garden where we have had so much fun and laughter over the years. Not all clergy are willing to open their homes  to the congregation and wider community, but I believe very strongly that the Rectory is a gift to be shared .The regular meetings of the PCC have all but a few been held in the comfort and intimacy of the Rectory in recent years, and the Annual Summer Tea Party, Open Air Service and Barbeque ,and the Rectory tea after the visit to the Pantomime, have proved to be a perennial favourites with many of you. I thank you for the Rectory, and for giving me such a lovely home from which to work, and serve you. I will miss it.

I will shortly celebrate my 66th birthday, which is no age nowadays , but still heralds a new era of  life for most people, including stipendary  clergy. Whilst it is known generally that I have no plans to retire, neither do I have plans  to creek on until I am 70, which means in effect, that I am always thinking about what God has in store for me, just as I wonder what God has in store for this great historic Parish church

All I need to know is that God has a plan and a purpose for each one of our lives and that His plans for me will be one very clear one day. As for the church, well one of the most delightful things that happened this last year was when I invited Emily and Kenneth to come and light the Advent Candle with me, no longer aided by but watched by their attentive and admiring Grandmothers. To me it was a sign of spring in the church's life, and I felt immensely grateful to God for having been allowed to see that sign of hope.

18 years ago, before I came to St, Mary's I sat down and wrote a 5 year plan of things I'd hope to see happen in St. Mary's. sadly the 5 year plan ran out and I never wrote another one. However, 17 years later I can look back and see how much of that vision for St. Mary's has come true.

Whilst not everything has worked out quite as I envisaged, one item, which I planned to "open " in 1997 and which has become a reality and a roaring success in the last year, is the Nave cafe, which I had put under the heading of "A caring church".
In my plan it was to be run by a catering manager, from an office which was to be established in church. There would also be an Administrator, under the heading of "An Organised Church".

Today we have this vision all rolled into one, in the person of Sue Heap, without whom , as my personal administrator, I could have not exercised my ministry in the way I have during this past year, nor indeed since she joined me. Her story is not uncommon, especially in Stockport, where many hundreds of people have lost  their jobs in the Council. What has made her story remarkable if not unique is how God has turned her life upside down and inside out and she now finds herself working to all intents and purposes full time, for no financial remuneration and for the church which she had come to know through her dealings with me and the Mayor's office over a number of years. I am to blame for this turnabout in her life, I know.

I would therefore at this point like to thank Sue profusely for her help and support and her loyalty during the past year. Yes there have been some tears, not a few, but there has also been much laughter, and a great sense of achievement and satisfaction . Sue has not seen the 5 year plan but Sue if you were to see that 5 year plan, I think you'd be impressed ! But there is a need now for another 5 year plan!  This church owes a great debt of gratitude to you this year, thank you!

Finally, looking ahead, the Project group has now given the go ahead for the next phase of work to be undertaken on the two vestries , with the help of a substantial Heritage Lottery Fund Grant, for which we should be most grateful . However there is a substantial shortfall in funding, which will need all our energy and good will to raise.

I hope that you, in your love for St. Mary's and in your generosity will share in bridging that not insurmountable gap. And I am sure that together we can look forward to the year ahead with an enthusiasm and optimism about what God wants to do here, which will obvious to all.

I will continue to preach the Gospel and to teach the Bible to the best of my ability, and to be a faithful  pastor of the flock, as best I can . I value your prayers, and share with you in thanking God for His goodness to us during the past year.

****
Rev. Roger Scoones
Rector, St.Mary's Stockport