



ST MARY'S, SUTTON VALENCE

Sutton Valence village lies between the parishes of East Sutton and Chart Sutton on the top of and on the southern slope of a steep escarpment running roughly east to west (the Greensand Ridge). The dominant building is Sutton Valence independent school which is on top of the hill overlooking the oldest part of the village. The busy A274 runs north to south and divides the village geographically, with the Church on the west side and the village on the east. North of the village and on the west side of the A274 is the well-supported village infant and primary school, directly opposite the co-educational independent school. An active, independent pre-School operates in the Youth Centre on the north side of the churchyard.

The village is in a conservation area and supports a 'castle ruin' (in reality, a small 12th Century Keep). Farming is a major industry and there are two popular pubs, a hairdresser, a (new) barber's shop and there is a rumour of a new cafe which will also sell second-hand books in the centre of the village. There are also three garages, two of which have shops. The village had a population of 1,863 in the 2021 census, although recent house-building will have increased this figure.

There is a large, well-equipped, and, consequently well-used village hall to the north of the village centre, two play areas (discounting the schools) and two areas of allotments, all well used. To the North there is a private nursing home. To the south of the village on the hill is a large social housing area some of which have been bought privately. This housing area is separated from the Church by both hill and A274.

Headcorn and Staplehurst train stations are a few miles to the south with regular services to London in one hour as well as Canterbury, Ashford International (although currently no 'international' trains now stop at the station) and the Kent coast. Maidstone, the county town of Kent, lies six miles to the north so Sutton Valence has a relatively high proportion of commuters, both locally and to and from London. A bus service operates from Sutton Valence to Maidstone in one direction and to Headcorn and Tenterden in the other.

THE CHURCH

There are no Churches of any other denomination in the Parish, although Sutton Valence School has its own Chapel and a full-time lay Chaplain.

St Mary's Church is to the west of the main road just south of the primary school. Behind the Church is the youth centre which houses the local very successful pre-school. This building is owned by the Diocese and Scouts jointly and is run by a management committee.

The Church building is early Victorian (1830s) on the site of older Church buildings. It is in very good condition with dedicated funds for its maintenance, thanks to a sizeable legacy restricted to upkeep and maintenance of the church building. It easily seats 200. It has a vestry, two tower rooms – one on the ground floor and the other at the level of the glassed off west end gallery. This houses parish archive documents used to put on monthly local archive exhibitions set up by a parishioner. There is a kitchen with power and water, and a toilet dedicated by Rt Rev Trevor Willmott, then Bishop of Dover, on 18th December 2016, after a great deal of hard fund-raising work master-minded by a parishioner.

New lighting has also been installed throughout the Church. There is a good Victorian organ, much used. Responsibility for decorative maintenance of the Sanctuary rests with the Diocese of Rochester. A number of pews have been removed from the rear of the nave, making a useful area for coffee, meetings etc. there is also a comfortable seating area in part of this space with toys and child-size tables and chairs.

The regular Sunday service is the 10.00am Common Worship Holy Communion from specially prepared seasonal Orders of Service booklets. These services are sung, with hymns and a service setting. Bible readings and intercessional prayers are given by members of the congregation. The numbers at the Sunday morning service average 15 – 25, rising to between 50 and 100 for special services on Remembrance Sunday, and at Christmas (especially, in recent years, at the Christingle Service held on Christmas Eve afternoon – 2024 pictured) and Easter,



'Preparing the Christingles'

when the congregation has a larger proportion of younger people. The age profile of the Sunday congregation reflects that of the village, and tends towards the more elderly and retired, although encouraging numbers of younger people and their parents are now being drawn into regular Church services through some outreach efforts.



MISSION AND OUTREACH

Home communion for the infirm has not hitherto been properly formalized, but contact has now been made with the Nursing Home, including the holding of regular monthly services, and with individual parishioners in their homes. This has been greatly appreciated by all those involved.

Mission Action Plan

The PCC has put together a Mission Action Plan, with the aim of improving and developing our Ministry, Worship, Discipleship, Fellowship, Care, Inclusiveness and Celebration at St Mary's Church. The general aims are to grow the spiritual life of the Church, to improve Worship and increase average attendance, to grow our ministry with families and children, and generally to make St Mary's Church more relevant to the wider community. To seek to ensure that we are on the right lines, we have completed a SWOT Analysis assessing the internal and external factors that contribute to our relative advantages and disadvantages. The Analysis is aimed at highlighting our strengths, but also, and more critically, our weaknesses, as well as the barriers to the implementation of the plan.

In brief, we believe that our Strengths are the wonderful building, in good repair, with some relatively new facilities (kitchen and toilet installed in 2016), a small group of very active members of the congregation who keep it so, two Lay leaders for Services of the Word, held, at present, on one Sunday each month, growing congregation numbers, consistently back to levels last seen about ten years ago, and magnificent church flower arrangements (although perhaps we should say 'thank you' more often).

Apart from not saying 'thank you' often enough, we perceive our Weaknesses to be a lack of car parking and the very busy main road separating the church from the larger part of the village, no Sunday School, and no children attending services on anything like a regular basis, a lack of 'doers' and a dependence on a very small, though willing, group, a lack of an active Church link with uniformed organisations, limited benefice 'togetherness' apart from joint services on fifth Sundays (so only three or four times a year), and no stipendiary ministry apart from the Vicar, so a lack of outreach and visibility of clergy in the village.

To balance the weaknesses, there are Opportunities, either pre-existing or ones we can create. We now lead short services in Sutton Valence Carehome once a month, taking the reserved sacrament. We intend to re-establish links with the village primary school (broken when a former head teacher declared that it was not a church school and broke previously active links), a new incumbent in 2025/6 (hopefully), and several new and active members of the congregation.

We perceive the Threats as coming from the financial situation following the loss of a substantial part of the income from the telecommunications mast (see below), the ever-present risk of the closure of one of the three Sutton Churches given the ageing population (itself a threat), the debilitating effect of a possible lengthy period of vacancy, and, while the small group of active members of the congregation keep the place upright, this very smallness is a threat. We see this five year MAP as definitely "work in progress" and to an extent, aspirational. Measurement of progress against the Plan is on the agenda for each and every PCC meeting.

As part of establishing links with local uniformed organisations, the local Suttons Cubs group recently came into church for their Faith badge. Among other things, they were let loose on the organ, discovering what sounds different stops can make (all under the close supervision of the church organist!). We were also able to provide some gardening experience for older pupils of Sutton Valence School in the churchyard, again under close supervision!



FINANCE AND GIVING

St Mary's, like other churches in the Benefice and indeed the wider church community, continues to face many financial challenges in the coming years not least of which are reducing collections, donations and fund raising as well as increased running costs, including our parish share.

Unlike other churches in the Benefice, however, we have been severely impacted by the significant reduction in our legacy mast income. The annual mast income of £10,000 is set to reduce to £3,250 p.a. in 2025, with a one off initial receipt of £3,500 as a transitional concession. The PCC are reviewing all options to mitigate this situation but we will inevitably have to rely on the local community and the goodwill of the Diocese to support our church.



As we move into 2025 we have a relatively healthy current account despite experiencing our first deficit in 2024. Regular banker's orders and collections plus related tax refunds were marginally down year on year. Donations, fund raising and fees earned were also down.

Costs were up in the year including our Parish share, a commitment that we met in order to support the important work of the Diocese. Like other Churches, St Mary's has relatively high, inflation driven, fixed costs in terms of insurances, clergy and benefice expenses and utilities and our parish share, along with everyone else's, will inevitably increase each year. It is encouraging that the Diocese are looking into the allocation methodology of the Parish share which may yield savings.

We are very fortunate to have a sizeable residual legacy, the majority of which is placed in a Diocese-managed fund. However, this legacy is restricted and it can only be used for repairs and maintenance to the Church fabric of the building, its permanent fixtures, and the Churchyard. There is also a small deposit account, which is also restricted, from which St Mary's has a commitment to maintain certain graves in the churchyard.

Despite an ongoing difficult financial position, the PCC continue to support the good work performed in the community and maintain the historic structure and fixtures and fittings of St Mary's church and look forward to the appointment of a new Vicar to lead not only our financial sustainability but our worship within our community.

Fund raising from functions such as the Christmas Fair, coffee mornings, organ recitals by the church organist and other local organists, as well as other musical events, has continued to bring in useful income. We aim to hold more musical events, in particular, to try to offset some of the loss of mast rental referred to above.

