

Rector's Report 2023 – *Mulbarton APM, 13 June 2023*



FOLLOWING JESUS *Sharing the journey*

WITH THE VILLAGES OF MULBARTON,
FLORDON, BRACON ASH AND HETHEL

We were very much back up to speed in a post-lockdown world through 2022 and into 2023. Personally speaking, the difference from 2021 was noticeable, with much more in the diary.

The efforts required in assisting with Mulbarton Village Hall turned out to be quite substantial from the start of 2022, and was ongoing throughout that year and up until last month (May 2023), when we finally were able to report back to the Charity Commission, having left them hanging since February 2022. The church has been pleased to release me to give that church time, so that I have been able to share the benefit of my charity experience for the sake of the local community. Various issues took up time and prolonged the wait for the village hall general meeting that we needed before we could report to Charity Commission. Now that it sits with them, things have eased. The Parish Council are working hard to be in a position to represent their views to VH on key issues, so that at a subsequent general meeting, we will be able to hear from residents about issues we couldn't cover in the April EGM, particularly around financial settlement and on what the final VH property will end up being. So there will be more work ahead. It has been a lot, but it should result in resolving difficult issues that have caused trouble for four decades, and we hope will be of significant benefit to the community in the long-term, which is core to the church's vision of "sharing the journey" in a Christ-like way. Personally speaking, it's been a privilege to work alongside so many dedicated volunteers, in many roles, not just VH trustees, all seeking the best for our beloved village.

We have continued to develop the community outreach, partnering with the Village Hall Charity to provide a "Warm Space" over the winter months, which was extremely well received by locals. Rather than running our own warm space, the church councils voted to invest whatever time, money, resources and volunteer help they would have given into the Village Hall's project, led by Mick, Angie and Becca, and we have continued to support the emerging Community Hub in the same way; in addition to running the monthly Mulbarton Mardlers in the social club, which has been in operation for over six years. It has been very encouraging to see these fruitful partnerships develop.

The food bank in the church porch has been tidied up, with new labelling and storage. It has had good use, both from donors and those in need. There is a steady flow through, demonstrating real demand and need in our village.

We broadened Mulbarton Church's local hardship fund in 2022, to make it a benefice endeavour to help anyone in hardship in our communities, across the four villages. We strengthened partnerships for this with South Norfolk Community Connector, Lucy Baldwin, and Mulbarton Primary School, and Norfolk Community Foundation. In these times of hardship, we have been able to reach and help 22 beneficiary households, distributing £5,570, some of which was NCF grant money, and the vast majority came from generous neighbours wanting to share from their excess with those less fortunate. Thank you to all those involved in this good neighbour scheme, which has been a privilege to manage.

Another local charity that has occupied an enormous amount of time and energy over the last year has been the Edwin Rich Trust. Although we only awarded one grant in the last year, there have been governance and tenancy issues that have been taxing. This is a charity where I am ex officio trustee, so it is part and parcel of the Rector role here in Mulbarton. I have not known a year when the role has been so involving, but again that has gone quiet now.

A particularly significant piece of work concerned a potential tenancy, which would have increased the Trust's capacity to help those in hardship twenty-fold, so I felt it worth doing whatever I could to invest church time in giving that proper attention – but that opportunity has been lost to us now.

Following changes in Mulbarton Primary School, sadly the "Open the Book" weekly visits to lead collective worship came to an end in October 2022. We remain grateful to have had the opportunity to assist our school in that way over 8 years or so. We continue to enjoy the mutual benefit of occasional visits to and from the school, and we still offer "Children of God Storybook" Bibles to reception class children, and Good News Bibles to school leavers.

The youth group at Mulbarton Church (YOMMY) was formed at the start of 2022 and has since bonded and grown in strength. It is a much valued community of a dozen or so local youth. We are grateful to Eve Newbery-Jesse for leading on this, and to all those who have supported. We have also been pleased to see the Community Choir emerge post-lockdown, flourishing tunefully, as we offer our partnership and support with that endeavour.

The volunteer bank of 80 or so which we built up during covid lockdown times, has seen a lot of changes in circumstances for both volunteers and those we were helping with prescriptions, shopping, lifts and odd jobs, and work is underway to revamp it and make it a sustainable "Heart of Mulbarton" good neighbour group. Some friendships forged then have stood the test of time and are continuing without any kind of formal oversight, which is very pleasing. We do still get a trickle of requests, which I deal with ad hoc, while the new work is being formed.

Last year, we finished catching up on all the weddings that couldn't happen in 2020 because of covid, and we saw funerals and baptisms settle back into the sort of levels we were seeing before covid. This year, by contrast, only 3 weddings in the benefice, of which only 1 in Mulbarton, which is a record low.

A legacy gift has mostly funded the new path, and we are grateful to volunteer support, esp. being inundated with about 50 volunteers (mostly local and some on holiday from overseas!) on the Big Help Out day at the Coronation – we are due to clear all the aggregate from outside the church imminently. Also mostly painted white railings on the Coronation Day, which are looking gleaming once again. Hugely grateful to yet more community partnerships in that volunteer day – such a good buzz for those who gathered as well.

Ongoing projects are to:

- repair the historic fence, which is badly damaged in places, a big job to make it good for another 10-15 years;
- electrical and lighting overhaul;
- internal redevelopment project – toilet, flooring, font, kitchen facilities to offer welcome to visitors;
- memorial cherry tree in churchyard to remember antenatal and neonatal bereavement;
- interactive prayer space in church.

Harvest House has been more well used and now generating much needed healthy income for the church, as well as providing greater benefit to the village through the things the business tenants offer.

The churchyard was late having its full first cut this year, for a variety of reasons, for which I do apologise, especially if that caused any distress for visitors to family graves. We are all caught up now and have a plan to keep on top - thanks once again to the parish council for their annual grant to assist with those maintenance costs.

Regarding finances, it is worth noting that our budgeted expenditure of unrestricted funds in 2022 was £67,000, whereas our income was £50,000. This meant we did not pay the £12,000 due to the diocese for central church costs. We are not the only ones feeling the pinch, like others we are having to look at creative ways to adapt to reducing means at a time of rising costs. I have lunch booked with the archdeacon in July with two other clergy of the deanery, so may find out more about any planned changes, as the Diocese of Norwich itself also adapts. There is a lot of reorganisation going on, like with many charities, having to restructure to survive. Watch this space!