

## **Annual Report of the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Clopton - 2025/26**

Since our last Annual Parochial Church Meeting, at the end of April 2025, we have seen the completion of the organ project, set in motion five years ago by our organist, Andrew Schurr, and Jenny Schurr, churchwarden. The parish church of St. Mary the Virgin, Clopton, is now the happy custodian of a very fine pipe organ, thanks to the admirable work of our organ-builder, Roger Pulham. The organ continues to improve as the instrument settles in. A special service of dedication was held to bless the organ and the choir, both of which were the beneficiaries of three grants - from the Garfield-Weston Foundation, the ON Organ Trust, and the Williams Church Music Trust. The majority of project funds were raised locally, for which we are most grateful. The dedication service was led by our rector, Reverend Mark Cresswell, and Bishop Graeme Knowles - it was a red letter day for Clopton Church congregation, organ and choir.

We are continuing our project to remember all the airmen who lost their lives from Clopton and Debach Airfield during World War II, together with the fallen from our village in the First World War, in our church's role as guardian of the memory of these brave men, and in honour of their sacrifice, and the sacrifice of their families, to secure our safe future.

Over this past year we have been visited from America by families of airmen, and particularly noteworthy is the contact we have had with the niece of Paul Hatalsky - she was able to provide a recorded video tribute to her uncle who died on the 20th February, 1945, for us to include in our act of Remembrance. The impact of these losses echoes down through the families' generations and they are comforted by our attention to the memory of the war dead. We have so far given tributes to 125 American airmen and we are about half way through those listed on the honour roll at the back of the church. The fallen are each remembered individually at our services of Morning Prayer.

There has been a marked increase in congregation numbers in all Clopton church services, and this is not only due to the wonderfully consistent and enthusiastic attendance of the choir. Several services have also attracted children, which is encouraging - St. Nicholas/Gift service, Harvest Festival and our traditional Christmas Eve service, of course. Our Christmas Day service also was very well-attended, as were Plough Sunday, and Easter Day.

From the beginning of 2026, our layed service has followed the Book of Common Prayer (as requested by the congregation). This traditional form of Anglican worship is shaped by choir and congregational singing and powerfully expressed in beautiful language. We are all finding our way together, and the change has been well-received by those who attend.

In addition, St. Mary's is holding a Choral Evensong on the first Sunday of every month throughout the summer. We now, therefore, have 3 services each month in our parish church, which is really heartening, and we are the only church in the benefice which follows the Book of Common Prayer in Morning and Evening Prayer worship.

Over the year, the choir has increased in number from 9 to 14 - and that is not including our excellent choir master. We now have 3 adult and 4 child sopranos, 2 altos, 2 tenors and 3 basses. We learn a new anthem each month, together with various psalms, canticles and responses. Our repertoire is very varied as was demonstrated in our successful concert last September, and will be demonstrating again at a concert to be held in June (spoiler alert - there will be Flanders and Swann in the mix!). The choir shows unstinting enthusiasm and loyalty, attending with great regularity and happily taking on extra commitments as they arise. These have included occasional offices, such as funerals and, recently, joining with Grundisburgh choir to sing at the benefice Palm Sunday service and when Dean Jo Hawes of Bury St. Edmunds held a service in Grundisburgh.

2025 was the Quinquennial year for St. Mary's, when a thorough architectural examination is undertaken. Thankfully, no dire problems were found.

Our Bell-ringers have enjoyed considerable success this year, recently winning a trophy at a striking competition. Clopton is extremely fortunate in having a strong and enthusiastic band of ringers under the skilled direction of our Tower Captain, David Stanford. And we are grateful for their excellent ringing before our Holy Communion services. Discussions are presently under-way for potentially augmenting our ring from 6 to 8 bells.

St. Mary's, Clopton, is in good shape with a dedicated team keeping the church alive.

With our rector, Mark Cresswell at the helm and covering our Holy Communion services on the 4th Sunday of the month, we have Jenny Schurr as church Elder, leading worship at Morning Prayer on the 2nd Sunday and Choral Evensong on the 1st Sunday. Jenny has been churchwarden for 8 years and is very happy to be joined from June by Adrien Stevenson. Andrew Schurr is our organist; Simon Lockyer, our choirmaster; Ronnie Wood (and family!) keeps the churchyard looking wonderfully clean and tidy, and Tanya Cox does the same for our church interior; Charmaine and Mike Williams take care of post-service refreshments, welcoming the congregation and many other tasks that arise, and Charmaine and her team of florists keep the church looking fresh and pretty.

We are keen to ensure that church and village remain one entity and our activities and events always have the wider village community very much in mind. Throughout the year we have hosted many activities, festivals and events:

- In May last year, the church laid on celebrations for the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe with a wartime-themed festival in the church, complete with cafe and sing-along, followed in the evening by a public screening of the film “A Royal Night Out” in the village hall, with bacon rolls, cake and hot drinks. All events were raising money for “Help for Heroes”
- The Strawberry Tea is a wonderful church/village event, and it was as lovely this year as it is every year!
- In June, the Pastoral Quire visited the church and gave a wonderful concert of poetry, music and song describing the passing of an English Year; in September our own choir held a concert, previously referred to; in March, the Suffolk Organists Association visited to give a fabulous concert on our new organ, whilst giving local experienced organists the chance to try out our restored instrument.
- In September, we held an exhibition displaying all the church activities, which was accompanied by a back-of-the-church cafe to refresh those involved in the “Ride and Stride” event organised by the Suffolk Historic Churches’ Trust, and others too!
- November saw members of the parish coming together to help “Save the Graves” - what a spectacular difference it has made now that more graves have been cleared of ivy. Each year chips away at the overgrown areas of the graveyard and smartens the place up no-end.
- Our monthly parish coffee morning was set up originally as a church/village event and continues to be very popular.
- Clopton Kids Club is powering enthusiastically through its second year, led by Jenny and Andrew Schurr, and Julie Gittoes. The group was very grateful to receive some wonderful equipment for the youngsters from the Woodbridge rotarians, and we also received a generous Council Locality Grant which we were able to share with the village hall in having the badminton court lines repainted (thanks to Carle Vince who did a great job), and allowing us to cover 2 term village hall fees and buy a new pool table . This year, we set up a baby/toddler music group, following a request of a new Clopton resident, which runs from 3pm, (when required), and older children arrive after school and play football, pool, table tennis, board and card games, basketball, and do fun craft activities, baking and making, until 5.30pm. And, of course, there is toast/ crumpets and hot chocolate or squash etc. on offer. We have a regular cohort of 6

youngsters. The success and importance of the group is summed-up in the words of the kids themselves (written in a 'thank you' letter to Councillor Bryce on receipt of the grant); *"I always wait all day for this - it is worth staying here for 2 hours"*; *"we are all really enjoying it - it is a place for us after school to come and relax with each other."* We have also sung with the children - hence the new choir recruits! They are really keen.

- Over the year, the church has continued its close association with the Clopton Ceilidhs, held by Ceilidhs on the Move, supplying a raffle, and pulled pork suppers and endless supplies of cake, in aid of the Clopton Kids' Club. Well done to Julie Gittoes and Ali Brand who do all the organising.

**2025-2026 has been another excellent year for the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Clopton, and we are looking optimistically towards next year and the future.**

***Jenny Schurr, Churchwarden***