

Rector's Report 2026

The Walgrave Benefice

Walgrave • Old • Scaldwell • Hannington

It is my pleasure to be writing my first report as your rector of the parishes of Walgrave, Old, Scaldwell and Hannington.

Many of you will know that I was installed as rector of this benefice at the end of August 2025. This report therefore covers the period from the commencement of my ministry in this benefice onwards. It is, of necessity, a partial account. The real life of these parishes is carried in ways that resist documentation — in the faithfulness of those who pray, the kindness of those who visit, the quiet constancy of those who simply turn up, the people who diligently maintain our church clocks and mow our churchyards. What follows attempts to name some of what has been visible, trusting that it is all, the visible and the invisible, held by God.

Worship and Liturgy

Upon starting as your rector one of my priorities was to revise the service liturgy to comply with Canon Law, to simplify the liturgy into service booklets and to reintroduce sung liturgical settings. As a benefice, I think it is safe to say that we have been on something of a journey getting acquainted with singing the Thorne Mass Setting. It is with grateful thanks to Ted, Linda and Pam, our organists, that we have made great strides with this. People are now commenting on the beauty and quality of our liturgy which is a joy to hear. If as Anglicans, what we pray is what we believe (or 'lex orandi, lex credendi' if you fancy a bit of Latin!) then my hope is that our worship brings glory to God and reflects our belief that God is deserving of all the beauty, awe and wonder we can put into our worship. ...And if you haven't been to a service lately do join us to find out.

My next priority was to increase service provision across the benefice, including services where the focus was on children, young people and families. In September last year, the PCCs all met together in a very convivial meeting to agree a new service pattern. The model of Benefice Holy Communion services was retained however services aimed at children, young people and families were added in. The new services have been well received, particularly in Walgrave where we now have children and young people attending ranging from toddlers to teens and young adults. However, across the benefice we are seeing growth and people returning to church. I give thanks to God for this, but I also wish to extend my grateful thanks to our congregations for always extending such a warm welcome.

The Liturgical Year

The liturgical seasons and feasts of the Church's year continue to provide focal points on which to remember or to rejoice and it is my pleasure to be able to highlight a few of them here:

Installation

My year with you all began with my installation at the end of August at which Bishop John Holbrook presided. It was a joy to be welcomed into the benefice however I don't think I will quickly forget swinging on



the end of the bell rope with my feet off the ground and it makes me smile to remember it now – that this is how my ministry with you all commenced, with joy

Harvest

Our Benefice Harvest Festival at Scaldwell church has been one of the highlights of my time with you. Such was the generosity of people that I was surrounded by a small fort of bags of food for the Foodbank. A bumper sized congregation and a bumper haul of food for the Foodbank made for a very moving service.



All Souls

Our All Souls service was a profoundly moving service where those buried or interred in our churchyards were named along with those people had asked to be included and prayed for at All Souls. It is always a privilege to be able to remember by name and to pray for those who have gone before us and this service was no different.

Licensing of Vicki Kelly as a Reader and re-licensing of Alex Elston, also as a Reader.

Mid November we welcomed Bishop Jonathan to St Peter's, Walgrave where Vicki Kelly was licensed as a Reader and Alex Elston was re-licensed as a Reader. It was a joy to witness two people being licensed or re-licensed in ministry as they respond to God's calling upon their life.



Walgrave Walking Nativity

Whilst God is glorified in beauty and majesty, God can also be glorified in joy and in chaos...and this was demonstrated at the Walgrave Walking Nativity. What an absolute joy it was! Children from across the benefice along with some from outside the benefice who attend



Walgrave Primary School all took part in the nativity. The loose script had Mary and Joseph walking the streets of Bethlehem/Walgrave knocking on doors looking for a place to stay for Jesus to be born. It was full of chaos and full of joy! My thanks and those of the churchwardens go to Jon at the pub, the parents and children and the homeowners who all agreed to take

part along with our colleagues from the Baptist Chapel who very kindly agreed to take part. It was wonderful to be able to take church *out* onto the streets of our villages.

Christmas

The feast of Christmas was celebrated with joy across our benefice. The carol services across our benefice were full and candlelit and beautiful. My thanks to our organists/pianists and for the choir members largely formed of Ted Dean's family and friends! My thanks too to villagers who read at our carol services. Each of our churches was also decorated beautifully and I would like to take this opportunity to thank all who decorated our churches so beautifully, including the young people who made Christmas decorations or flower arrangements for our churches. Across the benefice over Christmas attendance was up and it was a joy to welcome newcomers and returners to church as we celebrated the incarnation of the Christ child.

Holy Week and Easter

The PCCs were given the option of a 'full-fat' Holy Week or a slimmed down Holy Week and (thanks be to God!) they agreed to the 'full-fat' Holy Week. So, from Palm Sunday all the way through to Easter we journeyed together. On Palm Sunday we processed through the streets of Walgrave joyfully waving our palm crosses as we made our way to Walgrave Baptist Chapel where we heard the Palm Gospel read and from there we made our way to St Peter's, Walgrave where we heard the most important story any of us will ever hear read: the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. Holy Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday were all marked with beautiful services of Compline in our churches and all were well attended. Maundy Thursday was held at St Andrew's, Old and included a beautiful Agape Supper followed by a service of Holy Communion and stripping of the altar. It was a profoundly moving service. On Good Friday we had an hour at the foot of the Cross in Scaldwell which again was well attended. Holy Saturday was the Hannington Easter Eggstravaganza fundraiser where the children built a beautiful Easter Garden...and we discovered that some of the children have a vocation to dry stone walling such was the quality of the door to the tomb that they built that we were uncertain that the stone would be rolled away – however, all things are possible in Christ! At Easter dawn we gathered to light the Easter fire and the paschal candle and to proclaim that Christ was risen at which point the Exsultet was sung – that most ancient hymn dating from between the 4th and 7th century and still sung across the globe at dawn on Easter morning today. The dawn Eucharist was followed by hot cross buns and despite the early hour it was a joy to see so many there celebrating Christ's defeat of death. At 10am we moved to St Peter's Walgrave where the service of was crammed full of more joy than I can mention here but to name a few: we let off party poppers as we shouted with joy that Christ was risen, we were treated to a fabulous choir directed by Ian Clarke who performed a beautiful Easter anthem and one of the younger members of our congregation was baptised. What a joy it is to remember such a wonderful, spirit-filled Easter! My sincere thanks to all who made it what it was.



Music and Hymnody

During my time with you we have been shaped by the hymnody of the Church's broad tradition, and I am grateful to those who lead and accompany our singing. Particular thanks must go to Ted Dean for persevering to help us sing the Thorne Mass Settings and for arranging the organists rota.

Our organists give of their time and talents freely and I am deeply grateful for the beauty which they add to our worship.

In the coming year, we hope to have services of Evensong which will be held at St Andrew's, Old and I very much look forward to seeing this service flourish as people experience the simplicity and elegance of evensong.

Bell Ringing

Our bell ringing team continues to be led by Elaine Greatrex. We are blessed with a superb bell ringing team and it is wonderful to hear the bells ringing out across our benefice. Elaine also arranges for the maintenance and repair of the bells drawing in expertise from across the deanery. I am pleased to be able to take this opportunity to thank Elaine and the bell ringing team for all that they do to call people to worship and to continue the beautiful tradition of bells ringing out across the English countryside.

Men's Breakfast at St Peter's, Walgrave

This initiative was set up before my arrival in the Benefice after Jane and Katrina went on LYCIG (Leading your church into growth). Jane has commented: "it has been one of our most successful outreach efforts. It regularly pulls in 20 odd men each month some of whom would not normally set foot in church. It's a team effort with lots of helpers and the men are generous with their donations." My thanks to Jane, Katrina and the team for this. It really is a wonderful form of outreach.

Foodbank

The Foodbank team continues to work hard across our village community's to encourage donations to the Foodbank and to arrange collections and drop-off to the Foodbank. The needs of those requiring help from our local Foodbank is on the rise with the costs of living increasing so sharply. I remain grateful to those across our villages who serve those in need via their support of the Foodbank.

Fabric and Churchyards

We are blessed in this benefice to have four ancient and beautiful churches however each of them takes time, money and effort to maintain them. Our churchwardens and the wider community help in each of our churches to maintain the church and churchyard. I wish to extend my grateful thanks to all those who clean, polish, clear bat poo, mow, cut back and maintain the general beauty of our churches and churchyards. Many of the clocks and bells across our four churches are also maintained by skilled volunteers and again I wish to take this opportunity to express my gratitude. Diligent souls kindly and quietly keep our churches in good order and running - there are too many to name in this report, but if you are one of them, please accept my grateful thanks.

People often assume that the costs of maintaining our ancient churches are covered by the Church of England however they are not. All the maintenance that you see is done by volunteers and the costs of any repairs or updates are covered by fundraising, charitable giving and possibly by grants.

The costs of maintaining our village churches remains a concern and a challenge. Many villagers contribute to the costs of maintaining our churches via the parish giving scheme and I am deeply grateful for this generosity. Without the generous giving of those in our villages the upkeep of our churches would not be possible.

Fundraising remains very important to each of our churches. Across the year, fundraising events are held in aid of our churches and I am deeply grateful to all those who organise and attend these events. On that note, please do keep an eye out for all the delightful spring and summer events coming up in aid of your local church!

Occasional Offices and Pastoral Care

Ministry at the threshold — accompanying people at birth and death, in joy and in grief — is among the most sacred of the Church's callings and it is always a privilege to be able to provide this ministry within our parishes.

Occasional Offices

From September 2025 through to April 2026, the Benefice held:

Nine baptisms — for each and every one of these baptisms it was a joy to welcome them into the Body of Christ.

No marriages have been conducted yet this year however I am booking them in for this year and beyond and it is a joy to do so.

8 funerals or interment of ashes.

Each of these occasions is a moment of grace — a point at which the Church is given the extraordinary privilege of being present to people at the turning points of their lives. I do not take that lightly, and I hope those who have received this ministry have felt held in the love of Christ.

Visiting and Ongoing Pastoral Support

The pastoral care of these parishes is sustained through the network of care offered by the whole congregation: lay, licensed and ordained. Those who visit the housebound and the grieving, who make telephone calls and deliver meals, who notice when someone has been absent and ask after them — these are the sinews of pastoral ministry, and they are largely invisible in any report. Vicki Kelly is leading our pastoral care team and I look forward to seeing the ministry of our pastoral care team grow over the coming months and years.

I am deeply aware that in a rural Benefice like ours, the geography of pastoral care presents real challenges. The privacy of village life can make need invisible and I remain grateful to all who hold their neighbours in prayer and care, and who alert me when someone needs support.

Ministry

The ministry of the Church is a vocation and is shared by all baptised people who form the body of Christ, the Church. The New Testament vision of the Body of Christ is of a community in which gifts are diverse, distributed, and held in mutual dependence. No one person can or should carry the ministry of the Church alone; the question is always how we discern, equip, and deploy the gifts that are given. In this benefice we are blessed to have a large, active and growing ministry team. I give thanks to God and to those who are called to minister in diverse ways across this benefice.

Bible Study Groups

The bible study group continue to meet on a Tuesday morning and keep us all learning about our faith along with being an excellent source of fellowship and, at times challenge, as we study the bible together. My thanks to all those who lead, host and take part in bible study group.

During Lent, an explorers' group was formed which was held in the backroom of The Royal Oak pub in Walgrave. I am very grateful to Jon, the pub landlord, for letting us use the backroom of the pub for church groups and meetings. The explorers group resulted in two people returning to church and one person being baptised. My thanks to all who attended and gave of their time for our Lent explorers group.

Confirmation classes will be running later in the year. There are likely to be classes for adults and separate classes for children between the ages of 11 and 18 who wish to be confirmed.

Lay Ministry

The Benefice continues to be served faithfully by Licensed Lay Ministers, Readers, and a range of other authorised and informal ministers whose contribution is indispensable to the worshipping life of our churches.

Our Ministry Team currently consists of Alex Elston (Reader), Vicki Kelly (Reader), Jane Wren (Licensed Lay Minister and in further theological training), Katrina Parker (commencing the diocesan lay ministry course in September), Tim Kidger and Ted Dean (music director). The support and ministry of my colleagues on the Ministry Team has been indispensable to me. The wide range of services which now form part of our Sunday worship would not be possible without our dedicated Ministry Team. It is my pleasure to extend my grateful thanks to them in this report.

I am also aware of the unrecognised ministry exercised by those who serve without title: the churchwardens who carry enormous responsibility, the PCC members who give their time to governance, our safeguarding officer Phoebe Ludwig, our treasurers, the people who open and lock our churches, arrange flowers, wash linens, clean our churches, prepare rotas, make teas and cakes, and do the countless practical things that make worship and community possible. Please accept my thanks.

In September, Keira White will be commencing a Mission and Ministry degree at Ripon College, Cuddesdon with a children, young people and families focus. Keira will be a context-based student which means that part of the week she will be away at college studying and for two days a week she will be in the benefice with us as a member of the ministry team focusing on children, young people and families. Of all the things I prayed for when I arrived in this benefice never in my most audacious prayers did I dare to pray that a young person would volunteer to serve the Lord and our churches in this way! This benefice is already blessed with a brilliant ministry team who believe in the importance of the worship of old and young in church and it is an absolute joy to be able to report that this team is a growing and flourishing. My prayer is that more and more children, young people and families will come to church and come to faith in God.

PCCs and the Benefice Strategy Group

Across our four villages we have many dedicated people who serve on our PCCs, most of whom are members of our congregation but not all of them are. I am deeply grateful to all who give of their time and expertise in this way.

Two of our PCCs have faced difficulties in recent years to find people to volunteer to serve on the PCC. This creates challenges when it comes to governance of our PCCs. In January of this year a Benefice Strategy Group was formed to explore if a new benefice-wide method of

governance would be a better fit for our churches. One of the options being considered is to form a Benefice Joint Council which would replace the individual parish PCCs meaning that there would no longer be duplication of roles across the four parishes but instead there would be one governance body responsible for the governance of all four parish churches. The Strategy Group is being led by David Parton with representatives from each parish. Each person serving on the Strategy Group brings with them specific expertise and also knowledge of their local parish community. I am deeply grateful to the members of the Strategy Group for agreeing to serve their local communities and parish churches in this way. The work of the Strategy Group is ongoing. Information on any proposals arising from the work of the Strategy Group will be circulated to all members on our electoral rolls when they are in a position to put forward any proposals for consideration.

Looking Towards the Future

The question before any church community is not merely 'how do we survive?' but 'what are we for?'. These are not the same question, though they are related. The Walgrave Benefice exists not to maintain itself but to be, in these four villages, a sign and foretaste of the Kingdom of God — a community of welcome, worship, and witness.

As mentioned above, I hope that in the coming year we may find a way to better manage the governance burdens placed on our hard-working volunteers. I am also conscious that the upkeep of our ancient church buildings is too big a task for a small band of dedicated and, in many cases, long-serving volunteers. One of my tasks in the coming year will be to work with our Strategy Group, PCCs and village communities to see if there are ways that we could reduce the burdens or better manage them across our benefice by seeking support from the wider benefice community.

In July a new service pattern will be launched bringing slightly more consistency to the times and locations of services and reintroducing evensong to our monthly service pattern. A midweek service of Toddler Praise (proper name TBC!) will be launched in the new school year aimed at pre-schoolers and their carers. Other more informal evening church services will be piloted. As always, feedback on our services and/or service pattern is gratefully received.

However, my priority over the coming year, and I hope and pray that it might be yours too, will be to journey more closely and more faithfully with God, who loves me and loves each of you with a love the depth of which is unfathomable and unconditional. And so, I pray that more and more people, old and young across our benefice will come to know the deep and abiding love that God has for them.

Thank you for reading this.

May God bless you.

Rev'd Mel Stanley

Rector, The Walgrave Benefice

April 2026