



Left to right: Alex Lemieux and Julie Minter prepare the jigsaw Nativity at Farlington; the Christmas tree festival at St Cuthbert's Church, Copnor; rehearsals for the Leigh Park and Warren Park Community Nativity; and the Christmas tree festival at St Mary's Church, Brighstone

# Churches line up a perfect Christmas!



Riding Lights Theatre Company performing *Simeon's Watch*

## Family of shepherds is the focus for Christmas play

CHRISTIAN theatre company Riding Lights will give a unique perspective on the Christmas story when they perform at St Wilfrid's Church, Cowplain, this month.

Their talented actors will stage *Simeon's Watch* from 7.30pm on December 7. It tells the story of a normal family whose lives are transformed by this mysterious arrival. This family includes three generations of shepherds.

It focuses on Leah, who keeps losing things, including her sheep. Her father, Simeon, seems

to be losing something more serious, such as his memories.

But he still mutters about his 'angel' and seems to be watching out for something important to happen. Meanwhile, Leah's daughter's life seems to be racing ahead into the future.

The vicar, the Rev Ian Snares, said: "Sometimes it is good to be reminded that the arrival of a much-heralded Messiah would have had a massive impact on families at the time. Jesus wasn't born in isolation, but into a

family and a community who might have expected something or someone quite different. It helps us to think about what our reaction should be to a God who chooses not to remain remote, but gets his hands dirty by living among us." Riding Lights have developed a reputation for energetic and inspirational performances. This promises to be a mixture of thought-provoking drama and rib-tickling comedy.

Tickets cost £12 or £10, and are available on 01904-613000 or on [www.ridinglights.org/simeon](http://www.ridinglights.org/simeon).

**T**HIS month, more than 130,000 people will cram into our churches to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Despite the challenges of declining congregations in some of our churches, our pews will still be packed for carol services, crib services, Midnight Mass and Christmas Day celebrations. And that's not including all the visitors to our Christmas tree festivals and other special events.

The latest statistics from 2015 showed that 38,600 people attended community carol services in Advent in our diocese, plus 53,600 people for school and civic carol services. Another 40,500 also attended on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

Although many worshippers may attend both carol services and on Christmas Day, the figures still far outstrip the average weekly attendance of 10,400, which was measured in October 2015. This therefore provides us with a fantastic mission opportunity.

As in previous years, **Portsmouth Cathedral** will hold its traditional carol service on three successive evenings before Christmas to cope with the demand. Its service of lessons and carols will take place on December 21, 22 and 23 from 7pm. And its crib service for families will be held twice – at 3pm and 4.30pm on Christmas Eve.

The story of Jesus's birth will be re-enacted by local residents as part of the **Leigh Park and Warren Park Community Nativity Play**. It will be performed twice, at 6pm on December 3 and 2pm on December 4, in and around St Clare's Church.

Real donkeys and camels will be featured, including a parade of

camels through local streets ahead of the Sunday performance. Tickets are just £1, and you can find out more on [www.stfrancisleighpark.org.uk](http://www.stfrancisleighpark.org.uk).

Many of our parishes will open their buildings before Christmas for spectacular Christmas tree festivals, displaying hundreds of decorated trees. Visitors can enjoy the magical atmosphere and twinkling lights of the trees, as well as listening to seasonal musical performances and sampling refreshments.

The 20th annual **Brighstone Christmas Tree Festival** takes place from December 7-11. More than 200 decorated trees will be on display in seven venues in Brighstone and Mottingham on the Isle of Wight. A series of concerts includes performances by pupils from Brighstone Primary School, handbell ringers, vocal and instrumental groups.

The celebrations continue into the following week, with Nativity performances by schoolchildren on December 13 and 14, and displays of the decorated Christmas trees remaining in St Mary's Church and the Isle of Wight Pearl until Boxing Day. A free park-and-ride service will be available from the Isle of Wight Pearl on Military Road.

Among those taking part in the festival are the Isle of Wight High Sheriff, the chairman of the Isle of Wight Council, and the Lord Lieutenant of the Isle of Wight. Entry is free, and the proceeds go to charity. Last year's festival raised £11,000 and the total amount raised to date by this festival will rise to more than £100,000 this year. For full details, see page 15 or [www.bxtf.org.uk](http://www.bxtf.org.uk).

The **Alverstoke Christmas Tree Festival** is also returning this year, with more than 90 decorated trees displayed in St Mary's Church. It starts with a carol service at 6pm



The Rev Emmanuel Nazir and churchwarden Stella Wansborough with the shoeboxes from St James

on December 8 and continues on December 9-11.

See the magical display and enjoy refreshments between 11am-6pm on the Friday and Saturday and between 12noon-6pm on the Sunday. Admission is £3 or £2, with those under 16 admitted free.

**St Cuthbert's Church in Copnor** will hold its Christmas tree festival from December 2-4, featuring more than 20 decorated trees around the church. It's the seventh year the church has hosted such a festival and it includes craft activities for children and refreshments.

It kicks off with a concert by the Fine Voice Academy Choir at 7.30pm on December 2, and the first chance to see the display of trees. It continues between 11am-5.30pm on Saturday and 11am-5pm on Sunday,

with musical entertainment including the Pompey Pluckers and Westover Primary School Choir. There are also refreshments and Father Christmas is there from 2pm-4pm on both days.

**St John's Church, Locks Heath**, will also host a Christmas Tree Festival from December 1-4. The theme of its decorated Christmas trees will be 'Past, Present and Future'. The church will be open from 10am-5pm on the Thursday and Saturday, 10am-7pm on the Friday, and 12noon-4pm on the Sunday.

**St Peter's Church in Bishops Waltham** will host a crib festival from December 8-10, which will

involve a display of Nativity scenes and children's artwork. The cribs are lent by local families and depict Nativity scenes from around the globe, made in different shapes, sizes,

textures and colours. The paintings and collages have been created by pupils from local schools.

It starts on the Thursday from 5.30pm-8.30pm with mulled wine and mince pies, and continues from 10am-4pm on Friday and Saturday with coffee, tea, cookies and cakes available. Admission is free.

And you can see the Christmas story re-enacted at the **Wintershall Nativity Play**, from December 14-18. It takes place on the Wintershall Estate at Bramley near Guildford and includes a cast of hundreds and real animals.

Stand with shepherds and their sheep in the fields, see Mary arrive on a donkey, and sit in the barn where the baby Jesus lies in a manger. Book tickets on [www.wintershall-estate.com](http://www.wintershall-estate.com) or call 01793-418299.



One of the winning designs in the Farlington Christmas postcard competition, by Hannah Duffy

The parish of Farlington is organising a community Nativity jigsaw project this Christmas. Teenager Alex Lemieux has created a large wooden jigsaw puzzle measuring 4ft by 4ft which includes an outline of a Nativity scene.

Community groups and individuals each took a piece of the jigsaw to decorate. They will bring it back to the Crib Service at Church of the Resurrection on Christmas Eve. The jigsaw will be rebuilt as the story of the first Christmas is told.

The parish also held a competition among children from its congregations and local schools to design a Christmas postcard. The winning entries, designed by Hannah Duffy and Anjali Patel, were used by the parish to publicise details of their Christmas services and events to those living in the area.

And worshippers from **St James Church in Milton** were among many in our parishes to think about those less fortunate than ourselves this Christmas.

They packed 112 shoeboxes full of gifts to send to children living in orphanages in Ukraine and Moldova via the charity Love in a Box. The curate, the Rev Emmanuel Nazir Masih blessed the boxes after they were collected in church.